

STRONG-HAND SAXON

BY CHRISTOPHER BECK

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THE SCOUT LIBRARY No. 9

STRONG-HAND SAXON



"Jump!" roared Saxon, and Tom made a mad leap upwards.

Frontispiece.

See page 142.

STRONG-HAND SAXON

A BOY'S ADVENTURES WITH A
CANADIAN SCOUT IN THE NORTH-WEST

BY
CHRISTOPHER BECK

AUTHOR OF "NORTHWARD HO!" ETC.

London
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STRONG-HAND SAXON

CHAPTER I

THE MEN WITH THE TWANG

"BUCK up, Dandy," said Tom Holt, smacking the old plough-horse on his quarter, "we've done a hard day's work, but you'll get the best dinner o' the three. Sweet corn an' good chaff for you, but nothin' but potatoes and salt for me and dad."

Tom broke into a cheery whistle as the farmstead was neared, and the plough-horse stepped out more briskly at the sight of his stable. The boy was sitting sideways on Dandy's broad back, and the chain traces and roller-bar were trailing behind the horse.

"Taters and salt!" repeated Tom, with a chuckle. "I read somewhere in a newspaper that the British farmer lived on the fat of the land and did no more work than he could help. I wish the chap who wrote that'd take Berrymead Farm an' try it."

Tom whistled again. Things were never so black but that he could whistle, and they were often black enough at Berrymead, in all conscience.

The boy knew too well what a struggle it was for his father to keep the farm going. The land was poor, and they had had three bad seasons running. Unable even to pay for labour, Farmer Holt and his seventeen-year-old son did

nearly all the work themselves, and bitter toil it was at times.

They would not have had their neighbours know it, but the very beasts in the byre and stables lived better than Holt and his son. Without good corn and fodder the horses could not work, but potatoes, home-made bread, and an occasional rabbit snared in the spinney were all the farmer could allow himself. And even rabbits were scarce at Berry-mead.

As for ready money, Holt had had to thresh out new wheat and sell one of his carts to pay the last half-year's rent, a month overdue. It was lucky for John Holt that he had a son whom no work could tire, and who kept up the strength and cheerfulness of a young Hercules, even on potatoes and salt.

"Hullo!" said Tom, as the ramshackle old farmhouse and cattle-yard were neared. "Strangers!"

A high dog-cart stood at the front gate, the horse unattended and hitched rather carelessly to the palings by the reins. Tom recognised the cart—it was one that a job-master in the nearest market town let out for hire. But few visitors ever came to Berrymead, and Tom wondered who they could be.

"Not bailiffs, I hope," said the boy to himself. "Poor old dad, he's got trouble enough without that!"

As Dandy's hoofs crunched on the gravel, Farmer Holt himself appeared at the door of the house. He was a strongly built man of fifty, with a simple face, much lined with worry, and kindly grey eyes. He seemed strangely excited—a very rare thing with him.

"Hitch up the old hoss and come in quick, Tom," he said. "I want you."

John Holt dived into the house again, and Tom, wondering what was in the wind, stabled Dandy and went indoors.

In the little parlour stood his father, looking strangely bewildered, and two other men. It was to these that Tom directed his gaze.

One was a lean, sharp-faced man, neatly dressed, with long white hands and a professional look. He had a keen, penetrating glance.

The other man was rougher. He was six feet high, loosely built, and a long black coat hung on him awkwardly. His narrow face was disfigured by a scar reaching from the left eye to the corner of the mouth, which gave him a strangely sinister appearance.

Both men stared at Tom as he entered the room. To the boy it seemed that his appearance was a surprise to them. "This is my son Tom," said John Holt. "Tom, this is Mr. Edward Fulton," pointing to the lawyer-like man; "and he's Mr. Lomax," indicating the other. "They've come all the way from Ameriky to see me and tell me——"

Fulton broke in. His voice had a strong American twang. "Mr. Holt," he said suavely, "this is a private matter of business between us and yourself. Do you think there is need to tell your son anything about it?"

There was a slight sneer in the man's voice, which Tom instinctively resented. But his father replied at once. "I've no secrets from Tom. He looks like a boy, but he's past seventeen, and my partner, as you may say." Tom saw the strangers exchange glances, but his father went on: "Tom, poor Jim's dead—my brother. You remember I told you he went to Canada nigh twenty years ago. It seems he had some land there, and he's left me his heir. These gentlemen have come about it. They want to buy it."

"How much land is there?" asked Tom.

"Something like thirty thousand acres. Seems a terrible lot, don't it? Nigh three times as much as Squire Brand owns."

"But you can't compare it with English land," broke in Fulton hastily. "It's quite wild and undeveloped, and more than five hundred miles from the nearest railway. Anyone would give a thousand acres there for one in England."

"What are they offering, dad?"

"Three hundred pounds."

"I know it doesn't seem much," broke in Fulton; "but I think it's all it's worth. As I tell you, it's beyond the edge of civilisation, a lonely spot, quite undeveloped, and no one could do anything with it without capital. There's no house except a little log shanty, no cultivated ground, no tools or stock, no market near. The winter's long and hard and the summer short and hot."

"Then why do you want it?" inquired Tom bluntly, staring straight in the lawyer's sharp face.

The man smiled. "I don't. It's a client of mine—Mr. Glynne, of Winnipeg, a rich man. There's some timber on the place. That's what he's after; but it'll be probably years before he touches it. It will take a lot of capital to do anything with it."

"It don't seem enough to me," said Tom's father.

"Nor to me, dad," echoed the boy.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. "I'd be glad if you'd make up your mind. I may tell you one thing. The taxes are not paid, and in something like a month the place will revert to Government. Maybe it's no business of mine to offer you advice, and it doesn't matter to me one way or the other; but if I did make a suggestion I should urge your accepting Mr. Glynne's offer. This place looks as if it wanted a little money spent on it." His eyes dwelt on the threadbare carpet and shabby furniture. "You could do a deal here with three hundred." He pulled a bundle of papers from his inner pocket, unfolded them, and began spreading them on the table.

Tom spoke up. "I wouldn't take it, dad. What's the good of our wasting money here on land that isn't ours, and with a landlord that won't even mend our roofs for us? I'm sick of this slaving. Let's go to Canada and try our luck. The work can't be harder, and we'll be on our own land, and whatever improvements we make will be ours. Let's try it."

The old man stood by the fireplace, looking from one to another, plainly undecided. The scar-faced man sidled up to him and whispered in his ear: "Ask five hundred. I reckon he might run to that."

The words had a totally different effect upon the farmer from what the other had evidently intended. "No," he said, with sudden decision. "I agree with my boy here. Mr. Fulton, I won't sell that land. I'll go out and live on it."

Again Tom noticed the two strangers exchange glances. "You mean that definitely, Mr. Holt?" said Fulton.

"I do. We'll be in the workhouse if we stay here at Berry-mead another year or two. I'm not too old to try my luck in a new country. We'll sell up our sticks here and raise money enough for our passage, and go to this place my brother's left me. Sunk River you called it, didn't you?"

"Yes, Sunk River. Very good, Mr. Holt. But your passage is my affair. Your brother left the whole matter in my hands." He pulled out a pocket-book, selected a note from it, and handed it to the farmer, who took it wonderingly. "That's for immediate expenses," he said. "Our own passages are booked by the *Arabia*, which sails from Liverpool to-morrow morning. You'll come with us, for as it is it will be hard travelling to get to Sunk River in time to settle those taxes." He looked at his watch. "We've just an hour to catch the train at Granton. Put what you want for the journey in a bag, Mr. Holt, and we'll start at once."

"What about Tom?" inquired his father.

"You'd better leave your son here to look after the farm, and if necessary hold the sale. He can follow you as soon as you are settled."

The man's brisk manner had its effect. John Holt turned and left the room. Tom hesitated a moment, then followed. He found his father in his room hurriedly changing into his well-worn Sunday suit.

"Put them shirts in my bag, Tom," said his father. "We'll have to hurry to catch that train."

"Dad, I wouldn't go alone with those fellows if I were you. You don't know anything about them, and I tell you straight I don't like their looks."

"What—not go, and lose all that land!"

"How do you know what they say is true?"

"Mr. Fulton showed me Jim's will."

"A forgery for all you know, and, if not, why was he so precious anxious to buy the land?"

"But he gave me this money—ten pounds it is. He wouldn't do that if he meant anything wrong. You've got a maggot in your head, Tom. Don't waste time, lad; put them things in. We haven't too much time to get that train."

The old man's jaw was set in the stubborn fashion which Tom knew well. The boy said no more, but all the time that he was rapidly packing the bag he was thinking hard. By the time it was done he had a plan formed in his head, and, lifting the bag, he carried it downstairs and out to the trap, and then, making a round of the house, came in by the back door.

Tom Holt was no fool. He was much older than most youngsters of his years. His mother had died when he was only thirteen, and since then he had sturdily helped his father in every detail of the work and management of the farm. For some time past he had seen quite clearly that Berrymead Farm could not be made to pay. He had told his father so, but the old man, who had spent all his life on the place, had never taken the same view. He had always gone on hoping for better times. So Tom, well aware that the smash must come, had been making his own preparations, and for nearly three years had been hoarding every penny he could lay hands on. He sold rabbit-skins, he spent an odd day mole-catching or loading for shooting parties in Squire Brand's coverts. He denied himself everything. The consequence was that down in the old cider cellar, hidden behind a loose brick in the far wall, was a wash-leather bag holding nearly nine pounds.

"Not much," said Tom to himself as he stole cautiously

through the kitchen to the door at the top of the cellar steps, "but enough to pay my passage, I reckon. Dad'll be awful cross when he finds out, but I'm shot if I let him go alone with that pair of beauties. I don't know what they're up to, but there's something fishy about it, I'll swear. It won't take me more than fifteen minutes to run over to Honeywood across the fields. Dick Grainger will lend me his bike, and, as it's all downhill, I ought to manage to catch that train."

He reached the cellar door, which opened out of one end of the kitchen. It creaked a little, but he slipped through, closed it behind him, and made his way cautiously down the worn steps. There was another door at the bottom, and when he opened this he found himself in an underground place floored with clay—damp, dim, and chilly. There was nothing in it but a few mouldy rotten hogsheads. No cider had been made at Berrymead for many years.

As Tom closed the upper cellar door behind him, the door of the parlour, which also led into the kitchen, was pushed gently open, and Fulton came out on tiptoe. "What's he after?" he whispered to Bomax, whose tall figure towered behind him.

"Gone to get a drink, I reckon," answered Bomax. "I wish I had a drop of rye."

"Drink, not likely! Ben, I don't trust that youngster. He smells a rat."

"What kin he do—a kid like that?" demanded Bomax.

"Trip us up if we're not mighty careful. I'm going to see what he's up to. Follow me. Quick, before the old man comes down."

The only light in the cellar leaked through the rusty bars of a heavy iron grating. Tom had to strike a match to find his hoard. The small flame showed him plainly to the two men who had followed down the steps—showed, too, the hole in the wall and the bag of coin which he took from it.

"Young fox!" hissed Fulton. "So that's his little game."

He means to follow us. Ben, you've got to stop him. I must hurry back. I hear the old man coming down——”

Tom, on his knees beside the wall, was holding his precious hoard, when a shadow stooped over him. Before he could turn or cry something heavy and hard thudded on his head, and with one sob he fell forward and lay quiet.

Lomax waited one moment, listening intently ; then, unscrewing the stick with which he had struck down the boy, he slipped the two sections into a pocket and tiptoed quietly away across the damp clay floor.

CHAPTER II

IN THE CELLAR

It was about four in the afternoon when Tom had gone to the cellar. The light which leaked through the grating was dim when he struggled slowly back to consciousness. His head felt like lead. He put his hand up, and found his hair was clotted with dried blood.

"What's happened?" muttered the boy, sitting up dazedly. At first he could not remember anything. Then suddenly recollection flashed back, and he sprang up, only to topple over again dizzily. But he was dead game, was Tom. In another minute he was up again and staggering towards the door.

It was locked from the other side.

"The blackguards! They did it. And they've carried off dad." Utterly overcome, Tom sank down on an old cask. He was half mad with rage and grief. Here he was, trapped and helpless, while the scoundrels were carrying off his father, Heaven knew where. In the agony of the thought his own plight was forgotten.

But slowly it grew on him. He was in considerable danger of his life. The cellar was below ground. There was no other way out but the door or the grating, and the door was locked, while the grating, also heavily padlocked and rusted into its stone sockets, was out of reach. Knowing every inch of the place from babyhood, Tom was certain there was no escape. It might be days—even weeks—before anyone came to the house. Even if anyone did come, it was a hundred to

one they would not hear him. The disused grating was at the east end of the house, opening into a grass-grown yard. It was extremely unlikely that any casual visitor would go round that way."

"Plenty of time for me to starve," muttered Tom bitterly. "Poor old dad! Think of his being in the hands of brutes who could do a thing like that!"

Tom was not the sort to sit still, and as soon as his head stopped buzzing a little he got out his matchbox, and, cutting some splinters off one of the broken barrels, made a tiny fire, and by its light set to work to try to get out. The door, he knew, was hopeless—an old-fashioned affair of heavy oak, which nothing short of an axe would batter down. He made a pile of the least rotten of the old barrels and painfully climbed up to the grating. It was very nearly dark outside. The tiny patch of visible sky was already set with frosty stars.

Twice the barrels broke down; the third time Tom succeeded in reaching the grating. He shook it, but could not stir it. He forced his hand through and tried the padlock. Rust-coated as it was, the thick metal was still sound.

"I'll put a signal up, anyhow," said Tom, and, pulling off his necktie, he tied it to a barrel-stave and thrust it through the bars.

There was nothing more to be done. He dropped back, and, crouching beside his little fire, set himself to wait for daylight. It grew very cold. It was only March, and the night outside was frosty. Tom dared not use much of his wood, and his teeth chattered; also his head ached abominably. But he hardly thought of these things. It was the idea of his father in the hands of these unscrupulous blackguards that nearly drove him mad.

He dimly heard the old grandfather clock in the kitchen striking seven, and the familiar sound somehow gave him a little comfort. Next minute he started sharply, then sprang up, listening intently. A dim rap-rapping came to his ears.

It was someone at the back door. He shouted with all his might.

A pause. Again the tapping.

"They haven't heard!" groaned Tom in despair. Once more he shouted furiously, but he felt it was no use. The enormously thick walls smothered his voice and made him certain that he could not be heard. He seized a barrel-stave and pounded on the door.

The knocking came a third time, then stopped. Tom shouted till his voice failed him, then waited in agonising suspense. All was silent. In the frosty air outside the grating not so much as a leaf stirred. He pressed his ear against the wall, but could hear nothing. Flinging himself down on his face on the floor, for the first time he gave way to utter despair.

"Hulloa! Hulloa! Anyone there?" The voice came down through the grating. Almost believing that he was dreaming, Tom sprang up once more and gave a piercing yell.

"All right, partner. Don't you worry. How in thunder do ye get into this shebang?"

Bewildered and hardly understanding, Tom said: "What?"

"Where's the way in? If you're any thicker than this stick of mine you didn't get down this way. Which is the other way?"

Tom had his wits about him again. "If the back door's locked, break the window next on the left. That lets you into the sitting-room. Through that, and you're in the kitchen. The door opposite leads to the cellar, where I am."

"Right oh! Sit tight. I'll be along in a brace of shakes."

Tom couldn't sit. He stood by the door, positively shivering with excitement. The last three hours had played the mischief with his nerves.

But his new friend did not fail him. Tom faintly heard a tinkle of glass, then a firm step in the kitchen above, and the upper door of the cellar was tried.

"The key's gone, partner. Wait a jiffy. I'll bust it."

Another pause, then a crashing blow—another and another. “That chap’s got arms,” muttered Tom. A panel splintered, and the pieces came rattling down the steps. “That’s one done,” came the cheery voice again. “Oh, so they’ve left the key in this one!”

The key turned in the lock, the door swung open, and a man with a candle in his hand stepped down into the cellar—a square-shouldered man of middle height, about thirty, with a clean-shaven, capable face. “Hulloa, partner! Is this where you usually spend your evenings?” he said in a gently bantering tone.

Tom began to explain, but, what between worry and exhaustion and the ugly blow on his head, he became quite unintelligible. The other cut him short. “Come up out of this, boy,” he said. “Someone’s been using you pretty bad. What you need is a glass of something hot inside and a little cold water out. Then you’ll feel heaps better.”

Now that the suspense was over Tom felt as weak as a rag. He reeled and almost fell. The other put an arm round him and half led, half carried him up the stairs and put him in the big red-cushioned arm-chair by the kitchen fire. “Now just you sit there and wait till I tell you to move,” commanded the new-comer.

“But I can’t. I’ve got to find my dad. They’ve taken him,” protested Tom.

“I reckoned as much,” quietly replied this amazing man. “But it ain’t going to help him or you either, sonny, to go charging after him this hour of the night. You do as I say, and it’ll be all right.”

The man had a wonderful way with him. Tom sank back, and leaned his aching head against the cushions. He felt almost content. Quietly, and yet as quickly and deftly as if he had done nothing else all his life, the stranger coaxed the fire into life again, put a kettle on to boil, and while the water was getting hot set the table. He seemed to know by instinct just where everything was to be found. As soon as the kettle

began to sing he took out a flask, poured some of its contents into a tumbler, filled it up with water, and gave it to Tom. "Drink that," he said. "It's old Bourbon, none of your 'tangle-foot.'" Tom obeyed, and a grateful warmth ran through his veins.

"Now for that head of yours." He got a bit of sponge and some rag, and with fingers gentle as those of a woman washed and bound up the cut on Tom's head. "Nothing serious," he said consolingly. "You'll be right as rain in the morning."

Next minute he was frying bacon from a cherished flitch which hung on the rack, and which Tom and his father only cut from on Sundays. The savoury smell made Tom realise that he was fearfully hungry. The other made tea in the old brown pot, and toasted bread. "Pull up, boy," he said, "and eat hearty. You need it."

Although Tom felt as if it was wrong for him to be feasting while his father was in the hands of Fulton and Co., yet he made an excellent meal. When it was over the other filled and lit a corn-cob pipe and pushed back his chair. "My name's Saxon," he said, "Walter Saxon, if you want it all. Yours, I reckon, is Holt, though I don't know your front one."

"Tom," said the boy.

"Son to John Holt?"

"Yes—only son."

"So those hoodlums bounced your father and corralled you in the cellar. Ben Comax was one, I reckon. Who was the other?"

Tom stared. Who was this man who knew so much?
"Fulton he called himself."

"Let's hear all about it," said Saxon. He saw the doubtful look on Tom's face, and laughed. "Oh, I ain't one of the gang, though I don't wonder you're suspicious after what they've done to you."

"I'm jolly sure you're not one of them," exclaimed Tom

hotly. He had known this man less than an hour, yet felt he would trust him with his life.

"As long as you feel that way, it's all right, sonny; now go ahead and tell me about it."

Tom gave a brief sketch of the events of the afternoon. Saxon listened attentively. "So they took your dad away, and left you in the cellar."

"He didn't even say good-bye," said Tom.

"That wasn't his fault, Tom. I'll lay they filled him up with some yarn about your meeting him at the station. And when they got there they said you'd been delayed, and that he'd miss the boat if he didn't jump in quick."

"So they did take him to Liverpool?"

"I reckon so. It's true enough the *Arabia* sails early tide to-morrow. We can't catch her, or I'd have had you on the way by now."

Tom stared.

"You want to know where I come in? Here's the facts. Your uncle Jim was my greatest pal. When he died he got me to promise I'd go right away to the Old Country and find his brother John and tell him he was to have Sunk River."

"Then it's true?" gasped Tom. He had quite made up his mind that Fulton's whole story was an elaborate lie.

"About Sunk River? Yes, that's right enough. He left the whole outfit to your father. Didn't speak of you. Didn't ever hear of you, I reckon. You were born since he and your dad quarrelled and Jim left for Canada."

"What do they want with father, then?"

"To get the place out of him, sure."

"Why?"

"Now you've got me, Tom. I can't say. All I know is that Stark's always coveted the place. Of course, it's mighty pretty grazing. The most sheltered ranche in all that country. Beautiful grass, good water, and cliffs all round."

"Who's Stark?"

"The boss of the whole outfit. The biggest, ugliest black-

guard in all the North-West. A man that couldn't run straight to save his life, and yet so infernally clever that he's dodged the law for twenty years past."

"Then Fulton and Lomax were sent by him?"

"Aye, and he employs scores more like them. Cattle thieves, moonshiners, fur stealers, shady lawyers—they're all in his net."

"And they're taking dad out to him!" cried Tom.

"Taking him—yes," said Saxon. "But he ain't there yet by a long chalk. We'll be on their trail to-morrow."

"But the *Arabia* will have sailed."

"The German boat leaves Plymouth to-morrow night. She's a twenty-three knotter. With luck she'll reach New York the same day as the *Arabia*—may even beat her."

"Then we may catch them in New York?"

"That's what I'm hoping to do, sonny."

"You don't think they'll do anything to dad first?"

"Not they. If your father's anything like his brother he'll stick to his word, and I reckon they know it."

"They'll never get him to sell," said Tom proudly. "Dad doesn't change his mind."

Saxon nodded approvingly.

Tom went on: "Supposing we don't catch them at New York, Mr. Saxon?"

"Don't you dare 'mister' me! Call me just Saxon. I'm proud of my name. Reckon it's good enough for everything—Christian name and all. If we should happen to miss them at New York, we'll just have to follow them for all we're worth."

"Where to?"

"West, by Chicago, Winnipeg, and Regina."

"And after that?"

"If we're so blamed unlucky as not to catch them before that, I reckon we'll have to interview friend Stark."

"You mean they'll take dad to him?"

"Bound to."

“ And where does Stark hang out ? ”

Saxon shook his head. “ That’s one thing I don’t know, sonny. But if need be we’ll find out. Don’t you worry. We’ll come out top dogs. Now I reckon it’s time to turn in. I’ve fed the stock. The old horse was whinnying as I came by. I suppose you can get someone to look after things while you’re away ? ”

“ The Graingers will do that for me,” said Tom, getting up. In another half-hour he was in bed. But it was a long time before he got to sleep, and when he did he had ghastly nightmares of his father tied to a stake, while grim, copper-faced Indians sat round in a ring and sharpened gruesome instruments of torture.

CHAPTER III

THE CHASE BEGINS

NEW YORK Harbour flashed in brilliant sunshine as the huge liner came gliding through the Narrows and headed for her slip in the East River. Tom Holt, leaning over the rail near the bow, stared across the twinkling water at the great statue of Liberty which towered blackly against the pale spring sky.

Saxon followed his glance and smiled grimly. "Rum lot, these Americans, Tom. Sticking that thing up at the gate of the New World. After all, I suppose they're right, for there's liberty to do any blamed thing you please, from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter, with one only condition."

"What's that?" inquired Tom.

"That you can pay, my lad," replied Saxon rather grimly. "'Money talks' is their pet proverb over here, and you'll find it's true before you've been here a great while."

Tom was silent a minute, thinking hard. Then he looked up. "That's put an idea into my head, Saxon," he said slowly.

"Out with it," smiled Saxon.

"I've been wondering all the time why Stark is so keen about getting hold of Sunk River. I've read that there's lots of gold up in the North-West. Could there be any at Sunk River?"

Saxon shook his head. "Never heard of gold within hundreds of miles of the place. No; I think you'll have to guess again, Tom."

There was silence a minute. Then Tom said irritably : " I wish to goodness they'd hurry up. The *Arabia* must be berthed by now."

" I expect she is," answered Saxon philosophically. " But you needn't worry, Tom. The Chicago Limited don't leave till 11.50, and Fulton won't go on before that."

" They may go some other way."

" I don't think they will. Fulton's not the fellow to waste time, and it's much the quickest way. They can't go up the lakes from Buffalo by steamer, for the ice is not out yet."

" You think we're likely to catch them at the railway station ? "

" I do. But don't call it a station, sonny. It's a depot in this country."

The liner slackened speed still further as she passed through the tangle of traffic at the mouth of the East River. Huge ferries shot at twenty knots across her bows, tugs shrieked and snorted, strings of heavy mud scows blocked the way. Tom was almost dancing with impatience by the time the tug got hold of the ship to swing her into her berth.

The boy's patience had been pretty severely tried. Heavy head winds had cut their speed all the way across, and they had learned from the pilot that the *Arabia* had beaten them by nearly three hours.

The Customs came as a finishing touch. Indeed, the delay in the draughty shed was so long, that even Saxon began to look serious, and glanced at his watch more than once. Though neither had more than hand-baggage, they had to wait their turn, the names being taken alphabetically. Half-past ten sounded before they were free, and, grabbing Tom tight by the arm, Saxon steered him across the crowded muddy cobbles outside and into a waiting tram-car.

The pace at which that car whizzed through the roaring streets startled Tom. But even so, it was a long way to the Union Depot, and when they reached the entrance to the enormous station, it was barely thirty seconds to train time.

"She starts right on the minute," shouted Saxon, and was off at a tremendous pace. Tom had to run to keep up.

The rush of passengers, the clanging of huge engine-bells, the whizzing of steam nearly deafened Tom. But all the same he kept his eyes open. Next moment he found himself alongside an enormous train, composed entirely of long, heavy corridor cars. "Stay here and keep a sharp look out," Saxon bade him, and darting away down the train, was lost in the crowd.

Tom stared about. No one in the least resembling his father or Stark's two accomplices came in sight.

"Take your seats," came a shout. The train was actually moving when Saxon came rushing back. "In you get," he cried; "they must be aboard." Before Tom quite knew what was happening he was in the train which was gliding rapidly out of the station.

"We've got no tickets," he gasped.

"Get 'em on the train," replied Saxon. "Come along. We've got to go through every car." Tom followed his friend through the whole length of the train, from the first Pullman sleeper to the last baggage car. Their search was unsuccessful. Of all the two hundred or more passengers not one was the least like those they were looking for.

When they had passed through the last car, Tom turned to Saxon in alarm. "We must go back," he exclaimed.

Saxon shook his head. "She don't stop till she gets to Buffalo. No, Tom, I think we'd best go through to Regina. We're dead sure to catch them there, for that's where they'll leave the train, whichever way they've come."

"But why aren't they in this train?" asked Tom miserably. He was horribly disappointed.

"I can't tell for certain," said Saxon. "Fulton may have had business to keep him in New York, or—and I'm beginning to fear it's likely—he had a wire from one of Stark's spies to say I'd gone to England. In that case he naturally

suspected that I was hot on his heels and stayed behind on purpose to dodge me."

"I felt so sure we should find dad in New York," said Tom.

"I know. But we'll find him all right, lad; be sure of that." And Tom, glancing at the strong, resolute face of his friend, took comfort.

Presently Saxon got up to speak to the conductor. A bald-headed, thick-set man, with a beaky nose and heavy black eyebrows and moustache, came down the car. Tom noticed he limped a little. He sat down opposite Tom and in regular American fashion began at once to ask questions.

"You're English, I guess," he said.

"I am," said Tom.

"What do you think of this country?"

"I've only been in it about an hour, so I haven't had much time to think about it," answered Tom, amused in spite of himself.

"Gosh, that's pretty slick work! You came by the *Arabia*, I guess. Fine boat, ain't she?"

"No; by the *Fürst Bismarck*. She got in after the *Arabia*."

"Sakes! I wonder you caught the train. You must have been in an almighty hurry."

"I was," said Tom shortly. But the other was not discouraged.

"Going West?" he asked.

"Yes."

"California, maybe?"

"No; to Canada."

The other laughed. "You want to stay British," he said. "Wal, every man to his taste. The States is good enough for me. Hev a cigar?" and he pulled out a case of big black weeds.

Tom assured him he did not smoke, and just then Saxon came back. The American offered him his case, but Saxon

refused. The man asked more questions, but he got so little out of Saxon that he grew discouraged, and at last got up and went off to the dining-car.

"You didn't tell that man anything?" asked Saxon. Tom thought he spoke rather anxiously.

"Not much," answered Tom, in surprise. "Only that we came by the *Fürst Bismarck*, and that we were going to Canada. Was that wrong?"

"The less you say to anyone the better," said Saxon emphatically. "But never mind. There's no harm done. Come and have some lunch."

All day the train roared westwards across the great State of New York. When night came they were skirting Lake Ontario, and Tom had glimpses of a vast expanse of hummocky ice and desolate snow-lined shores shining coldly under an Arctic moon. He was surprised at such cold so late in the year. "It's a sight harder than I ever saw it at Berrymead," he told Saxon.

"You'll see it harder yet, my boy. It's black winter still in the North-West. The ice won't go out for a couple of weeks yet."

It was all very new and wonderful to the boy, and, in spite of his worries, he took keen interest in everything, and asked no end of questions. Saxon was glad to see it, and encouraged him. He was getting fond of this lad. "There's real good stuff in him," he said to himself. "He's developing every day."

Tom met a number of new dishes at dinner. Clam broth, quails on toast, pumpkin pie, and salted almonds. He made a capital meal. At ten o'clock the negro car porters came along and set to work letting down the bunks. Tom and Saxon had a "section" between them. Tom took the upper berth and Saxon the lower. Tom found it so awkward to undress in the cramped space behind the leather curtain that he gave it up as a bad job and merely took off his coat, waistcoat, collar, and boots.

The bunk was most comfortable, with a capital spring mattress, but Tom found he could not sleep. He lay hour after hour while the train thundered across the flat lands beside the Great Lakes. Like all American trains, the car was overheated, and what between that and the salt clam broth he had had at dinner, Tom felt his throat getting absolutely parched. At last, in despair, he got up and, sliding quietly down out of his berth, made his way through the vestibule at the end of the car to the anteroom where the big filter stood. He filled a cup to the brim with ice-cold water, and drank eagerly. Then he sat down to cool off.

"That's a heap better," he said to himself after a while. "Now I believe I'm cool enough to get forty winks."

The swing door opened noiselessly, and Tom's stockinged feet made no sound on the thick carpet of the car. As he moved silently up the narrow corridor between the heavy leather curtains which hung down on either side, he suddenly became aware that someone else was afoot. Not one of the coloured porters, but a white man was stealing very cautiously along in front of him.

"What on earth is he up to?" wondered Tom, and some instinct made him stop and crouch close between the ends of the curtains.

"Hanged if it isn't the same chap who came and yarned to me this morning!" he muttered. "I could tell him anywhere by his limp."

The man was tiptoeing along absolutely noiselessly. Heavy silk shades were pulled over the electric globes in the car roof, but there was plenty of light for Tom to see that the American was taking the utmost precaution to make no sound. Also that he had something gripped tight in his right hand. He was fully dressed, and a close-fitting fur cap covered his bald head. "Why, he's stopping opposite our section," Tom muttered again. "That looks fishy. 'Pon my soul I believe he's going to try to pick Saxon's pocket." He almost chuckled. "Silly ass! Saxon sleeps

with one eye open. He'll give him beans. If not—well, I'm here," and Tom braced himself up for a rush.

With one hand on the heavy curtain, the man stopped and looked sharply up and down the car. With an ugly shock of surprise, Tom noticed that the black moustache had vanished; so had the bushy eyebrows. His little, deep-set eyes glittered keenly in the lamp-light.

Apparently satisfied that all was well, the man pulled the curtain aside with his left hand. Quick as lightning up went his right; something long and bright flashed before Tom's eyes, and before the boy could so much as move, was driven downwards with tremendous force into the very centre of Saxon's bunk.

"He's stabbed him," groaned poor Tom, then, recovering himself, he gave a yell which roused half the train, and made a furious dash at the murderer. The latter turned with a snarl, hesitated just a second; then, as curtains were flung aside and bare legs swung out over the edges of the bunks, he turned and ran with amazing swiftness up the car. The door stuck a trifle. The man wrenched it open. But it delayed him just long enough for Tom to catch up. As it slid back the boy jumped fair and square upon the murderer's shoulders, and man and boy together rolled headlong through the opening, and out on to the rear platform.

The car was the last of the train, and the platform was surrounded by a three-foot iron rail with a padlocked gate at the side. It was snowing fast, and the platform was thick with the clinging flakes.

Tom was no chicken. His muscles were hard with years of outdoor work. And he had the other at a disadvantage. Even so he could not hold him; the fellow's strength was simply amazing. He grasped the rail with both hands, and, with an enormous exertion of muscle, hoisted himself up, Tom still clinging on his back.

Some old Berserk strain which had slumbered through

the centuries in Tom's ancestors awoke. He saw red. Yet, even in his fighting fury he knew exactly what the ruffian was trying to do—that he meant to heave him clear over the rail on to the snow-clad track that spun beneath them in the glare of the tail lamps.

Tom shifted the grip of his right arm, bringing it tight under the other's chin, and at the same time made a desperate effort to kick the other's legs away from under him. So, for a furious moment, they struggled together on the swaying platform while the long train thundered westward through the bitter night and the driving snow. Tom was dimly conscious of loud shouts, of men packed in the doorway, trying to force their way through. Next moment the train went swinging round a curve. The lurch swung Tom and his enemy heavily against the gate at the side of the platform. With a snapping crack the padlock gave; the gate flew open and instantly they were gone. Horrified faces stared blankly at the empty platform with its trodden snow.

If Tom Holt and the bald-headed man had fallen on the rails, ten to one they would both have been killed on the spot.

As it was, the swing of the train whirling round the sharp curve flung them both clear of the metals, and they plunged headlong into the deep drift which filled the ditch at the edge of a low embankment.

The shock tore them apart, and Tom found himself floundering, gasping, deep buried in the icy powder.

"He shan't escape," was the boy's one idea, as he struggled to free himself from the clinging snow.

At last he got his head up, only to see Saxon's assailant plunging away at right angles to the line, making for the thick brush which lay at the far side of the railway clearing.

With a wild yell of rage, Tom dashed after him.

The snow was still falling thickly. The bald-headed man had a long start. For one moment Tom saw him, an uncouth black shadow through the mist of flying snowflakes. Then

he was gone. At the same moment the boy put his foot into a deep hole and went sprawling on his face. His head struck a stump hidden by the snow, and he lay, stunned.

When he came to himself he was flat on his back on a cushioned seat in the smoking-car.

"He's all right," said somebody; "nothing worse than a crack on the head."

"Thank Heaven for that, doctor. I thought the brute had knifed him."

Tom started violently and sprang to a sitting position. The voice was Saxon's!

The boy stared in blank and utter amazement. Had he dreamt the whole thing, or was he dreaming now? Only a few minutes ago he had distinctly seen a long knife plunged apparently into Saxon's heart, yet here was his friend standing beside him as well as he had ever been in his life.

At Tom's puzzled expression, Saxon burst into a hearty laugh. "It's all right, sonny. He didn't get me that time."

"B-but I saw him!" stammered Tom.

"You saw him rip thunder out of one of the company's superfine down pillows," answered Saxon. "I reckon I'll have to pay for it. But I got his knife, anyhow," and he produced a murderous-looking bowie with a nine-inch blade.

"I heard you crawl out," explained Saxon. "I've a way of sleeping with one eye more or less open. I reckoned there'd be trouble of some kind before morning, and that was his chance. So I just fixed up the pillows to look as much like your humble servant as possible, and slipped up into your bunk. Sure enough, he'd been waiting. Made me want to howl to see him crawling along with that big knife of his, and when he jabbed the pillow I nearly burst."

"Wish I'd known," put in Tom ruefully. "I thought he'd done for you."

"I hadn't an idea you were watching," said Saxon more gravely. "And you didn't give me half a chance to stop you. You were after him like a bull after a red rag, and

before I could do a thing you were both over the end rail."

"It was a mighty brave act, young man," said the doctor, who had been standing by.

"It was that," agreed Saxon heartily. "I'm proud of you, Tom."

Tom flushed with pleasure. Praise from Saxon was praise indeed. "Only wish he hadn't got away," he said regretfully.

"No fault of yours that he did," returned Saxon emphatically. "We couldn't hold the train or we'd have chased him. But," and he smiled grimly, "it isn't exactly a pleasant night to be out alone in the woods. Ike Foxley will be sorry for himself before morning."

"Foxley—is that his name?" exclaimed Tom.

"That's it. I recognised him when he was trying to pump you this morning. Now, if you're all right we'd best turn in again. We're not due in Chicago till eight o'clock, and if this snow goes on we'll be a bit late."

Saxon was right. At breakfast the conductor told them that they would not reach Chicago till past ten.

Tom was miserable. "We shall lose the connection," he groaned, and Saxon could hardly get him to eat a mouthful of the excellent chops and buckwheat cakes and maple syrup.

"When you've been out here a bit longer," said the elder man kindly, "you'll know it's not a mite of use worrying about anything—let alone trains."

They were no sooner out of the heated train and standing on the bitter, draughty platform of the great Chicago station than a sharp-faced boy in a blue uniform came hurrying up, shouting:

"Anyone o' the name o' Holt?"

"My name's Holt," said Tom.

"What initial?" asked the lad, looking keenly at Tom.

"T," said Tom.

"That's all hunky," said the boy. And shoving a letter into Tom's hand he was lost in the hurrying crowd.

Tom tore it open. Saxon saw his face change as he read it. Without a word he handed it over.

"To Thomas Holt," it ran. "Take warning. It'll be best for you and your dad, too, if you go right home again. No harm's meant to the old man, and he'll be shipped safe back if he's reasonable. You go further than Chicago and neither he nor you'll ever see England again."

There was no signature, no date, no heading, no postmark on the envelope.

Tom looked anxiously at Saxon.

"Scared, Tom?" inquired the latter.

"Only for dad," replied the boy.

"Want to go back?"

"Not me," said Tom stoutly.

Saxon smiled. "That's all right. We leave for Regina by the three-thirty. Come on. We'll get some kit here. It'll save time when we get to Regina."

CHAPTER IV

TREACHERY

"HERE's where we hit the trail," said Saxon, as they stood on the wooden platform of Regina station and watched the great Canadian Pacific express roll heavily westward across the vast white expanse of prairie.

"It's hard to think it's the beginning of April," said Tom, as he gazed wonderingly at the snow-covered roofs and the fur-clad people who hurried out to the waiting sleighs.

"Suppose it is for you," smiled Saxon; "but the snow won't last much longer, and when it goes it goes in a hurry. That's why we've got to make tracks as fast as we can. You can travel twice as quickly on runners as on wheels."

"I'm ready as soon as you are," said Tom simply.

"We leave to-morrow morning," said Saxon, as he gave the baggage-man the checks for the luggage. "Send these to the Elgin Hotel," he told him. "Come on, Tom."

The hotel was a small one in the back street. "Came here to be quiet," explained Saxon. "Where's Mr. Bates?" he asked the waiter.

"He left some time ago," answered the waiter. "Mr. Vyner's the new owner."

Saxon looked annoyed. "I'm sorry," he whispered to Tom. "Bates was a good fellow. I don't know Vyner. But as we're here, I'll stay. It's only for a night. Now I must leave you. I'm off to get news from a man I know. He'll very likely be able to tell me whether Fulton and Lomax have reached here yet."

"But they couldn't!" exclaimed Tom.

"It's just possible. They might have come by Buffalo and Toronto. You stay here," he went on. "And make yourself comfortable. Supper's at seven, but I shall hardly be back before nine. I must see about ponies for the trip."

"Shall I wait for you?"

"No, have your supper at seven and turn in early. You've a precious tough day before you to-morrow. And—mind—not a word to anyone."

Tom promised, and Saxon hurried away. Left to himself, Tom unpacked the furs and blankets which they had bought in Chicago and set them ready for an early start. Then a bell clanged noisily through the wooden walls and he went down to supper.

There were only two other men besides himself in the dining-room. One was a little wizened chap with a thin face and a peaked nose, the other a burly bear of a man with huge hands and heavy features.

They sat at a table by themselves, and Tom, who was hungry, paid more attention to a juicy steak and fried potatoes than he did to his neighbours.

A sound of loud voices made him turn. The two men had evidently quarrelled. What about Tom had no idea, but the big man was abusing the little one like a pickpocket.

The latter was badly frightened. He shrank back, his miserable little face yellow with fear.

"Brute!" growled Tom. He was the sort who always takes the part of the under dog. He half rose from his chair, then remembering Saxon's warning, changed his mind and called the waiter. "What's the matter? Why don't you stop it?" he asked.

"I daren't," said the man. "That big feller—Snell's his name—he's a holy terror. He's always quarrelling with someone, and when he comes in here we don't get no other customers."

"You must be a fool to let him in," said Tom contemptuously.

"Dirty, sneaking cur!" roared the big man. And Tom saw his huge leg-o'-mutton fist suddenly descend upon the little chap and send him and his chair sprawling on the floor.

Every drop of blood in Tom's body boiled. He was across the room in two jumps. "Why don't you hit a man your own size?" he cried furiously.

"Keep your meddling nose to yourself, or you'll get it knocked off," growled the big fellow insolently.

The small man picked himself up and crept behind Tom. "I didn't do nothing to him," he whined. "Don't see why he went fer to hit me."

"All right, he shan't touch you again," said Tom reassuringly.

"Who's a-going to stop me?" sneered Snell.

"I'll try," answered Tom quietly.

"I'd take on three like you," jeered the other.

Tom was tingling to be at the brute. But again the thought flashed upon him of Saxon's warning.

Snell saw his hesitation. "Doggone ef the Britisher ain't climbed down already," he laughed. "Thet's always the way with the scum they sends out here from the Old Country."

Tom threw prudence to the winds.

"If you won't give your word to leave this man alone I'll do my best to teach you," he exclaimed hotly.

"Come and do it then," returned the brute with a cruel laugh.

At this moment the waiter came running in with the hotel keeper. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, I can't have this in a respectable house!" cried the latter.

"Skeered of the police, eh? All right; Britisher, come outside. There's plenty o' moon to see by."

"Not in my yard!" cried the hotel keeper. "You mustn't make a disturbance there."

"Anything to oblige," said Snell. "That there house next door's empty, ain't it, Mister Vynner?"

"Yes, it's empty," answered the proprietor eagerly.

"We'll go along there, then."

"Don't go, sir," begged the wizened man of Tom. "He'll half kill you."

Snell gave a jeering laugh. "I'll attend to you later, Wiley," he said threateningly.

Tom cut him short. "Come on!" he cried.

Snell led the way. There was a board fence round the hotel backyard. Snell clambered clumsily over it. Tom followed, and, much to his surprise, the little man came too.

"I'll second you," whispered the wizened little chap. And Tom almost laughed at the confident way he said it. One blow of Snell's ponderous fist would pulverize the poor little chap.

The night was all white moonlight and bitterly cold. In the deserted yard the untrodden snow lay hard and smooth. There was no mark of footsteps, and the black windows stared emptily out on the deserted place.

Tom kept a wary eye on his enemy. He had heard of American methods from Saxon—the kicking, biting and gouging. He did not mean to be caught unawares.

But Snell squared up in proper fighting style. Tom, glancing at the man, felt that his chances were slim enough. This was a fighter. A great, hairy, primeval brute. He was bull-necked, thick-lipped, and his short, coarse hair seemed to bristle on his round bullet head.

His eyes were narrow, cunning, deep-set, thatched with thick eyebrows, his nose was blunt, and his jaw heavy. His hands were huge, and even through his coat Tom saw the gnarled muscles of his upper arms rise and writhe.

But Tom himself was no chicken, and the past three weeks had given him confidence in himself. With the instinct of a born fighter, he saw that he had one pull over his enemy. He was far more active. Those short, thick legs

were no match for his own long, clean ones. "I'll have to keep away," he thought. "Keep away till he's blown. And the snow's all in my favour."

With a quick motion he flung off his coat and stood lightly poised before the other.

Snell paused a moment, eyeing the boy fiercely. Then he came on with a rush.

Tom dodged. As he did so something sprang monkey-like upon his back, a pair of thin arms wrapped themselves tightly round his neck, and at the same moment Snell's ponderous fist caught him square on the forehead, and down he went like a log in the snow.

Voices came dimly to Tom's ears.

"See if the sleigh's here yet, Wiley."

A door opened and shut. There was a moment's pause. Then came Wiley's whining tones. "No, it ain't there yet."

"There ain't no hurry, anyway." It was Snell speaking. "Thet Saxon ain't a-coming back till nine."

Tom opened his eyes. His head was ringing abominably, and he could feel blood trickling down his face. He tried to put his hand up, but found he could not. He was tied hard and fast with one rope round his body and arms, and another round his ankles. A cork gag was firmly fixed between his teeth.

He was lying flat on his back on the bare floor of a dirty, unfurnished room. But there was fire in a small stove, and Snell and Wiley sat at their ease, one each side of it, on a couple of empty packing-cases.

"Hello, the tenderfoot's woke up! Hed a good snooze, stranger?" observed Snell with a sarcastic grin.

Tom had never felt more like murder in his life. But as it was sheerly impossible for him to move, he contented himself with glaring at his enemy.

"Don't look pleased, do he?" remarked Snell. "Un-



Tom dodged. As he did so something sprang monkey-like upon his back.

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grateful dog, Wiley, seein' as how we've took so much trouble play-acting fer his amusement. Quite a pantomime, warn't it, Wiley ? ”

“ Hee-hee ! ” laughed the ugly, wizened imp, chuckling horribly. “ No, he don't seem best pleased, not so pleased as Stark'll be, hey, Snell ? ”

“ I reckon it ought to be a smart bit in our pockets,” grinned Snell. “ We did the trick proper. Say, I was skeered Saxon might hear ye, Wiley, when you was listening outside o' the door in the hotel.”

“ They don't hear me very easy,” answered the little wizened man. “ I ain't heavy, like you, to make the boards creak. And I didn't have no boots on either.”

“ You was skeered just the same,” jeered Snell.

“ So'd you be if ye thought as Saxon was going to get hold of ye,” retorted Wiley.

“ Saxon won't trouble us much longer, I reckon,” growled the bully. “ Stark's a match fer him.”

Tom quivered all over with excitement. What did the fellow mean ? What new plot was afoot now ?

The men went on, quite regardless of their helpless prisoner.

“ You reckon Vyner's got his story right ? ” inquired Wiley.

“ He ain't got a thing to do but tell the truth. Say the kid had a row with a chap, and they went into the next yard to settle it, and he ain't seed Holt since. Saxon's no fool. He'll reckon as Foxley has come in by the evening train and got on his track, and he'll take his gun and go out to Foxley's place. Ef he reckons to drive, Vyner's got the sleigh man fixed, and ef he walks I reckon the trap's jest as good.”

Wiley gave his horrid, dry chuckle. “ Say, Snell, Stark's a dandy, ain't he ? ”

“ He is that,” admitted Snell. “ He's the only one o' the bunch as has the wits to get ahead o' Strong-hand Saxon.”

Tom felt he would go mad if he had to lie here much longer and listen helplessly to these scoundrels' plots.

"They'll kidnap Saxon just as they have me," he groaned to himself. "And I can't move a finger to warn him. What an idiotic fool I've been! Shall I ever learn any sense?"

Presently Wiley spoke again. "This here game must be costing Stark a pretty penny."

"That's so," answered the other. "But I reckon he means to make about a thousand per cent on all he spends. That's about his usual profit."

"Sunk River's a mighty fine place. There ain't any such grazing in the Nor'-West, an' you can grow fine crops there too," said Wiley thoughtfully; "but seems to me it ain't wuth such a terrible lot of money."

"You kin bet your boots it's wuth about ten times as much as you think it is, ef Stark wants it so bad," returned Snell emphatically.

"He's safe for it now, anyway," grinned Wiley. "Old man Holt'll sign anything, let alone a bill o' sale, when he sees we've got the kid here to rights."

A jingle of bells came faintly from outside. Wiley jumped up. "Here's the sleigh. Let's get along. We ain't got any too much time."

Snell stooped and picked up Tom as easily as if the strapping young farmer's son had been a child. "Reckon you wishes you hadn't left England, don't ye," he asked jeeringly.

"Hold on a minute!" exclaimed Wiley. "Lemme see ef the coast's clear."

A moment later he was back. "All right," he said. Snell slung Tom over his shoulder, carried him out of the empty house into the deserted street, where a pair-horse sleigh was waiting. He flung the boy roughly into the bottom of it and covered him over, head and all, with a buffalo robe. Tom heard him exchange a word with the driver, who apparently walked away. Then Snell and Wiley got in, Snell took the reins, and the horses started off at a sharp trot.

Tom, lying helpless in the bottom of the sleigh, heard the runners hiss across the hard packed snow. He was bumped up and down and half suffocated with the thick rug which covered his head.

He was horribly frightened. Where were they going? What was happening? Was the terrible Stark actually in Regina, and were these ruffians using himself as a bait to deliver Saxon into Stark's hands? In spite of the bitter cold, the perspiration dripped from the boy's forehead, and he shook all over like a man in an ague.

But the fit only lasted a minute. With a powerful effort Tom pulled himself together. "Nice chap, I am," he thought bitterly, "chucking it like this! What would Saxon think of me? If only I had my hands loose! One thing's in my favour, at any rate. They can't see me under this rug."

He at once began writhing and wriggling in a silent, desperate effort to get his arms free.

The rope was in two turns round his body, and so tight that already both hands were swollen and numb. To move them was absolute agony, but Tom set his teeth and pulled for all he was worth.

The right arm, he found, was hopeless, but the left he could move a little.

The coarse rope tore his shirt and cut deep into his flesh.

Snell felt him moving. "Die still, can't ye?" he growled, and kicked him savagely in the ribs.

"I'll make you pay for that, you brute," said Tom to himself, grinding his teeth in helpless rage. He lay quiet for a moment, then began again.

The rope was giving. He was sure of it. Another minute and a throb of exultation shot through him as he realised that his left arm was free. He slipped his hand across to his right waistcoat pocket, and a thrill of delight shot through him as he found that his knife had not been taken from him.

But his triumph was short-lived. Snell had felt him moving

again. "Dift that robe, Wiley, and see what the cub's a-doing of," he cried angrily.

Tom heard. He felt Wiley lift the fur, and went quite mad with the same desperate rage that had seized him when he had seen Foxley stab Saxon in the train.

As Wiley lifted the rug Tom's free left arm shot up, he snatched the whip from Snell's unsuspecting hand, and with all his strength sent the lash curling across the flanks of the near-side horse.

The horse, a powerful bay, sprang forward with a jerk that nearly broke the traces. There was a howl of rage from Snell and a scream of abject terror from Wiley.

"Hold him, ye fool!" roared Snell with a savage oath, and pulling furiously at the reins.

But before Wiley could interfere out flew the lash again and cracked across the quarters of the off-horse. Terrified already, the poor brute gave a wild kick which sent the splash-board flying in splinters, then dashed away at full speed.

Snell, reviling horribly, tugged with all the strength of his powerful arms. But the horses had the bits in their teeth, and were pulling the light sleigh by the reins alone, as they galloped madly down the long, straight, moonlit road. It was as complete a runaway as ever was seen.

Of the three in the sleigh the only one who was not frightened out of his wits was Tom. He was beyond it. His one feeling was sheer exultation that, whatever happened, these two treacherous blackguards were in as bad a hole as he was. "If I'm killed, so will they be," he thought triumphantly.

Snell kept howling to Wiley to hammer Tom over the head, to kill him, do anything to him. But the wizened man was far too scared. He was literally paralysed with terror, and crouched in his seat with his legs drawn up, his eyes goggling, and gripping the side and back of the sleigh with both his skinny hands.

The sleigh swung and bumped like a feather at the heels

of the maddened horses. The powdery snow flew in clouds. The runners fairly screamed over the icy road. The few passers-by stopped and turned and stared at this startling apparition which whizzed past with the speed of light, but not one attempted to stop the frantic horses.

Snell, in his desperate efforts to pull up the runaways, merely made things worse. He pulled so hard every now and then that the front of the sleigh hammered into their heels, driving the poor brutes clean crazy. But even if Tom could have spoken he wouldn't have told the man what he was doing wrong. This stolid farmer's son had turned into a different being. His lips were tight set, his eyes glowing with the light of battle. He had wedged his feet against the splash-board, his back against the seat, and so keeping himself partly steady had managed to open his knife, and was sawing away at the rope, which still held his right arm.

Snell saw what he was doing, and roared again and again to Wiley to stop him. But Wiley was perfectly helpless, and Snell himself was far too busy hanging on to the reins to do anything else. Tom saw it, and even in their desperate plight chuckled with savage glee.

Tom cut himself badly, but he cared not a jot. Another moment and the rope fell away. Both hands were free. Slash, slash, and he had his feet loose. But Wiley was plucking up courage. He rushed at Tom. The boy seized the whip lying at the bottom of the sleigh and made one desperate slash at the miserable wretch. He put all his energy into that slash. Wiley gave vent to one piercing, craven yell, then toppled headlong from the sleigh.

The miserable little reptile went bounding over and over in the snow, and next moment was a mere black dot in the distance on the white, moonlit expanse.

"Hope I've killed him," growled Tom remorselessly. Then, knife in hand, he turned on Snell.

Snell gave a beast-like howl of fear and rage. But even now he did not drop the reins. Tom saw that the man's

face was purple with exertion, that the great veins were standing out knotted and swollen on his forehead, while in spite of the cruel frost the sweat streamed down his cheeks. Knife in right hand, left grasping firmly the back of the seat, Tom stood over Snell like an avenging angel. His mind was working like lightning.

What was he to do ? Unless he took the reins a smash was certain. If he took them he was at Snell's mercy.

He made his decision like lightning.

In front of a sleigh is a raised metal fork through which the reins pass.

Tom pointed to it with his knife. "Hang your reins over that fork," he sternly ordered.

Snell only snarled.

"Hang your reins over the fork," roared Tom again. "Quick, if you don't want this into you." And he brandished the knife over the man's shoulder.

With a mad howl of fury Snell suddenly hurled the reins far out on to the backs of the madly galloping horses, and turned on Tom like a wild beast.

CHAPTER V

A LESSON IN WOODCRAFT

THE crisp snow crackled under the feet of Saxon's pony as he trotted sharply back towards the town, and the strong moonlight threw his shadow black as ink on the pure white surface.

Not a cloud sullied the steel-like glitter of the stars, not a breath of air stirred the sombre foliage of the firs and hemlocks that bordered the track.

But Saxon never gave a thought to the beauties of the night. "Wonder if I did right to leave the lad," he muttered to himself, as he dug his heels into his sturdy mount and pressed it to a sharper canter. "He's a good boy, Tom. Plucky, too. I like him first-rate. Well, one can't expect a tenderfoot to learn everything all at once. If Stark don't get us both first, Tom Holt'll grow into a man that Canada will be proud of."

Suddenly he reined in his pony sharply, and horse and man stood like a bronze statue. Sounds carry far in the clear stillness of a great frost, and Saxon's quick ear had caught the thud of galloping hoofs and the shriek of sleigh-runners hurtling over hard-frozen snow.

"A runaway, for a dollar!" he muttered sharply. "Coming this way, too. Mighty queer at this time o' night. Get up, pony!"

His whip cracked across the pony's flanks, and the strong little beast sprang into a gallop.

The trees broke away on either side of the trail, and Saxon

was on the steep bank of a frozen creek. Exactly opposite, and coming straight towards him, a pair of horses galloped madly, dragging at their heels a swinging, bounding sleigh.

"Great ghost, there'll be a smash!" exclaimed Saxon horrified, and next moment he had forced his pony down the steep bank. Its iron-shod heels rang an instant on the hollow ice, then, picking his spot, with a wild scramble he was up the far side and galloping hard towards the runaways.

Saxon went straight for their heads. Every trick of the plainsman was his, and he knew he was taking heavy chances. But he had to, or else the sleigh and its occupants would go clean over the creek bank, a drop of at least twenty feet. At the mad pace they were travelling, horses, men, and all would certainly be killed.

As he had hoped, the runaways swerved a trifle. At the same moment Saxon saw that the reins were hanging loose on the backs of the horses. Whirling his pony round on its hind legs, he forced it hard against the near side horse, and, leaning over, seized the dangling reins.

He knew too much to try to stop the mad beasts at once. If he had, he would simply have been whisked clean over his pony's head. Guiding his own animal by pressure of his knees, he gradually threw his weight on the reins, and steered the runaways in a wide circle to the left.

For a moment they galloped with unabated speed, then, breaking through the untrodden surface of a drift, they checked, and though they still struggled frantically, the steady pressure began to tell. Presently they stood still with hanging heads and heaving sides, while the steam rose in thick clouds into the windless, frosty air.

As the sleigh came to a standstill, one of the two occupants suddenly sprang out, and ran at full speed towards the thick belt of trees to the left.

"Stop him!" roared the other, and never in his life had Saxon been more startled than to recognise Tom Holt's voice. 'But he wasted no time in questions. He flung the reins

to Tom. "Stay with the horses, whatever happens!" he cried, and swung his panting pony after the running man.

The snow was deep on this side of the clearing, and Saxon's pony, breaking through the crust, plunged in up to the girths. Snell reached the trees fifty yards ahead of Saxon, and vanished instantly among the ink-black shadows of the gloomy forest.

Tom, watching the chase with quivering interest, saw Saxon rein his pony on to its very haunches and dismount with a spring on the off-side. As he did so, a whip-like crack rang from the forest, and the poor pony, rearing wildly, fell over almost on top of Saxon, gave one quiver, and lay still.

As it fell, so did Saxon, and lay motionless in the snow.

For a moment Tom was within an ace of dropping the reins and rushing to the rescue.

"Stay with the horses, whatever happens," that was what Saxon had said, and Tom set his teeth and determined not to blunder a third time.

He quite believed that Saxon was either killed or badly hurt, and it was one of the worst minutes he had ever spent. He could have yelled with relief as he saw Saxon's left foot rise above the snow and wag twice to and fro. He knew it was a signal to himself.

Next moment a figure emerged from the black shadow of the trees and came cautiously towards where Saxon lay.

It was Snell.

In his right hand was something which glinted in the moonlight. Tom could not make out whether it was a knife or a pistol.

Saxon lay like one dead. Snell's bulky form, head forward, shoulders stooped, crept across the snow like some monstrous ape.

Nearer and nearer. Still Saxon did not move the fraction of an inch. Snell gained courage, straightened up, walked more rapidly.

"Thinks he's dead," said Tom to himself with beating heart.

Snell was within ten yards of the dead pony, when Saxon's right arm shot forward as if driven by a spring, a pistol cracked, and Snell, with a hideous howl of pain and dismay, dropped his weapon and blundered over backwards.

"Hurrah!" shouted Tom, unable to control himself any longer.

Still Saxon did not move. It was Snell who got up, and, groaning horribly, began staggering away back towards the trees.

Saxon let him go, and it was not until at least five minutes after Snell had reached the trees that Saxon rose to his feet, dusted the snow from his clothes, and stretched himself leisurely. Then he turned to Tom. "Tie those horses up and come over here," he said.

The horses were quiet enough now. Tom led them to a dead stump and hitched them.

"Why did you wait so long after Snell was gone?" was his first eager question.

Saxon smiled. "Just what I'm going to show you, lad. A first lesson in woodcraft. Come with me."

He followed Snell's first track towards the woods. It went only a little way in, and stopped behind a large log. "What does that tell you?" he asked Tom.

"Looks as if he had laid down there."

"Exactly; he was blown with his run, and dropped in the first shelter he came to. Does that tell you anything else?"

Tom looked puzzled. "The shot which killed your pony came almost at once," he said. "How could Snell have shot from here?"

There was a gleam in Saxon's kindly eyes. "Go over there, Tom. Examine the snow, and see if it tells you anything."

"There's another track here!" cried Tom next moment excitedly. "Longer and narrower than Snell's."

"Good lad! Have you any notion whose tracks they are?"

"Not Stark's!" exclaimed Tom.

"Yes, Stark's," answered Saxon. "I'd know those large, firm prints anywhere. Snell could not possibly have fired that shot. Not only because he was behind the log there, and probably couldn't see me, but he was much too blown to shoot straight. I owe the loss of my pony to Stark."

"Then why did Snell come out after you—not Stark?"

"Stark knows me," answered Saxon, laughing. "He thought I might be foxing, and sent Snell instead. Snell has a bullet through his right shoulder, but I only wish it was through Stark's instead."

"And where's Stark?" cried Tom.

"Gone."

"Where?"

Saxon shrugged his broad shoulders. "I could follow his tracks," he said. "But we haven't time. We must get back to the town at once. On the way, perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me how you come to be gallivanting in the woods here instead of asleep in your bed at the Elgin."

Tom looked rather sheepish, but told exactly what had happened.

When he had finished Saxon gave a dry chuckle. "Say, sonny, they get a rise out of you every time, don't they?"

Tom hung his head.

"Never mind, lad," said Saxon encouragingly. "You'll learn. I don't blame you at all, and you've come out top dog, that's the main thing."

"What are we to do now?" inquired Tom.

"Pick up that skinny rascal if we can find the pieces, and then go and put the fear of Heaven into Vynner," said Saxon, whipping up the horses.

But Wiley was gone, and Saxon would not wait to look for him. The face of the waiter at the Elgin was a study when Saxon and Tom entered. He spun round and tried to bolt. Saxon made one jump, seized him by the collar, kicked his legs from under him, and flung him into a corner.

"Lie there!" he growled, and the wretched man, shaking all over, lay still as a whipped dog.

Vyner, hearing the noise, came running in. The moment he saw Saxon he pulled a pistol.

"Ah, would you?" roared the scout, springing on him and sending him, pistol and all, flying across the room with a tremendous backhand blow.

"Help!" howled Vyner, but Saxon had him again, jerked him to his feet, shook him till his teeth rattled, then slammed him into a chair, and stood over him.

"So you're another of Stark's men, are you?" he exclaimed contemptuously. "'Pon my soul, he does choose some beauties. I've a mind to kill you for treating that boy as you have to-night."

Saxon's blue eyes seemed literally to blaze, and he looked so formidable in his rage that Tom, for the first time since he had known Saxon, realised the tremendous personality of the man.

"I didn't want to do it," groaned Vyner in abject fright. "Stark made me."

"That's a lie. Stark bribed you, you mean. Now, tell the truth as you value your skin. When did you see Stark last?"

Vyner hesitated.

"Give me a stick, Tom," said Saxon coolly.

The mere threat was enough. Vyner went green. "This afternoon," he exclaimed hurriedly.

"When did he come to town?"

"Two days ago."

"Where is he going?"

"I don't know. I swear I don't."

"No, he wouldn't tell a thing like you. Now, when were Fulton and Eomax here?"

Vyner hesitated the fraction of a second. But Saxon's face was enough. "Two nights ago."

"Who was with them?"

"An Englishman. Looked like a farmer."

"Aye, now we're getting to it. And they went on next morning?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"In a pair-horse sleigh."

"Whose sleigh did Snell have to-night?"

"One of Stark's."

"That's all right. Tom, get me a rope or a strap."

Tom found a rope, and Saxon tied Vyner up tightly in the chair and gagged him. He treated the waiter in the same way.

"Now, Tom, you take those horses round to the stable, rub 'em down, and feed 'em. They'll be wanted again in an hour."

"Right," said Tom. "I'll have 'em fresh as paint by then."

When Tom brought his horses round again Saxon had hot coffee ready. He also had a number of neatly-corded packages at the door, which he loaded into the sleigh. Among other things was a small hand sleigh and a big parcel of provisions.

Saxon chuckled as he stowed the latter away. "Spoiling the Amalekites, Tom. I've cleared Vyner's larder."

"And what have you done with him?"

"Stowed him in the cellar along with his waiter. Wonder what sort of a story he'll tell the police to-morrow. Put this fur coat on, Tom, and nip in. We've got to be thirty miles from here by daybreak."

CHAPTER VI

SAXON'S STRATAGEM

SAXON seized Tom by the shoulder and shook him. "Wake up, lad. They're coming."

Broad awake in an instant, Tom flung the thick rug back and sprang up.

The sleigh was at rest on top of a great wave of snow-clad prairie, and a blood-red sun was heaving itself over the eastern forest into a sky shot with splendour indescribable.

A thin breeze whistled out of the north-west, and the cold was intense.

"Where?" cried Tom, straining his eyes in the direction of Saxon's pointing finger.

"See, just under the sun. Six of them, as I live."

Tom's eyes were good, but not trained like Saxon's. It was a minute or more before he was able to distinguish their pursuers, mere tiny specks against the great white sheet of snow.

"Quicker than I thought," said Saxon. "And all mounted."

"But they'll see us," cried Tom.

"I mean them to," was the quiet answer.

Tom was amazed. "We can't tackle six of them in the open," he exclaimed.

"Quite true, lad. We are not going to." And Saxon smiled.

He whipped up the horses, and the sleigh went hissing down the far side of the low hill.

Tom was lost in wonder. He had the deepest faith in his

friend. But how, with two tired horses, he was going to keep ahead of half a dozen mounted men was quite beyond him.

Saxon, however, seemed quite calm. He had slightly changed the direction of the sleigh, and was driving diagonally towards a belt of wood to the right—that is, to the north of their line of route.

Long before their pursuers topped the rise the sleigh was among the trees. Now Saxon turned due north, and keeping the horses well up to the traces, they were presently through the wood, which was only a belt less than a mile wide, and on open prairie again.

Now Tom got a fresh shock.

Saxon turned the horses' heads due eastward.

"Are we going back to Regina?" demanded Tom.

"Not just yet, boy. We've got to find your dad first." And Saxon smiled his strange, quiet smile.

The runners grated on frozen grass. Tom saw that Saxon had driven the sleigh on to a patch of bare, wind-swept ground.

"Out you get!" cried Saxon sharply, pulling up the horses. He himself sprang from the sleigh, and, untying the small hand sleigh, or "jumper," which had been fastened to the back of the other, began loading it with a speed which made Tom gasp.

In less than five minutes all their small possessions were on the sleigh. Then Saxon led the horses to the edge of the bare patch, and, setting their heads towards Regina, gave each a sharp cut with the whip.

Surprised beyond words, Tom saw the horses throw up their heads and start at a sharp canter for home.

Saxon walked back to where Tom stood staring. "Feel like breakfast, Tom?" he said coolly.

Tom merely shook his head. He was beyond words. Saxon took the rope of the "jumper," and started at a brisk trot back towards the belt of woods which they had just

passed through. Tom blundered through the snow hard at his heels.

Reaching the wood, Saxon made for a clump of undergrowth, plunged into it, scratched the snow away, and sitting down, began to unpack some provisions.

"Cold grub this morning, Tom. But we'll have a fire to-night." Then, seeing that Tom was paying no attention to him, but staring with all his eyes out on to the prairie, he chuckled softly. "Getting the hang of it, eh, lad?" he asked.

Tom looked round. "I think so," he said a little doubtfully.

"Watch, and you'll see the whole circus for yourself. But don't talk loud."

"You may be sure I shan't," returned Tom indignantly.

Saxon had set out bread, butter, cold bacon, and a little tin of brown, baked Boston beans, when the peculiar rustling sound of horses galloping across hard-frozen snow came to their ears, and all of a sudden six mounted men swept into sight barely three hundred yards away.

They were following hard on the track of the sleigh.

Instinctively Tom crouched low in the snow, holding his breath. He could hardly believe that their pursuers could not see them, and it seemed amazing to him that Saxon could go on calmly munching a thick bacon sandwich while danger was so deadly near.

First of the six rode an immensely tall man on a powerful black horse, which he sat magnificently. In that marvellously clear air Tom could actually distinguish his dark face and hawk-like nose.

"Yes, that's Stark," came in Saxon's quiet tones. "He's giving us a whole lot of trouble. Some day I shall have to settle with that gentleman. I say, Tom, he'd give a bit to know we were sitting here all snug eating our breakfast not a quarter of a mile off?"

"So he's hunting the sleigh," said Tom at last, as the



First of the six rode an immensely tall man on a powerful black horse.

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riders galloped away in the distance. "But suppose the horses stop."

"Not till they get back to their stable in Regina," chuckled Saxon. "There's nothing for them to eat till they get there, and the poor beasts are hungry."

"But when Stark finds he's been fooled?"

"I expect he'll use a lot of shocking bad language," replied Saxon.

Tom laughed in spite of himself. "But he'll come after us again."

"Not a doubt of it. But"—and Saxon turned suddenly serious—"he'll have a job to catch us, Tom. I'm going to take you a short cut over country where horses aren't much use. And the first thing you've got to do is to put on these snowshoes."

Tom looked helplessly at the great racquet-shaped frames of wood and smiled, and when Saxon fastened them on he first fell on his nose and then on the back of his head.

But he was naturally quick at picking up things, and in less than half an hour he could stagger along without falling over himself more than once in five minutes.

Then the march began.

If Tom Holt lives to be a hundred he will never forget that day. How he struggled up hills and slid helplessly down them, how he caught in hidden logs and fell head over heels into drifts; above all, how both legs, shins especially, became one awful ache.

"It's rough on you, Tom," said Saxon as at last they halted in the midst of a thick fir forest for midday dinner. "But you're doing splendidly, and I'm proud of you."

And Tom, who could have cried for the pain in his legs, took courage and struggled on.

Although Saxon pulled the heavy jumper, Tom could not keep up with him. Towards night it clouded heavily and a fine snow came whirling on the rising wind out of the bitter north.

This finished Tom. He did not complain, but he began to fall about like a drunken man, and Saxon, seeing it, resolved to camp. He chose a spot under the lee of a heavy belt of timber, cleared away the snow, and lit a roaring fire.

If the miseries of the day had been utter and unending, that supper which Saxon prepared made up for it all. Bacon frizzled deliciously over red-hot embers, the aroma of steaming coffee rose richly in the cold air. Saxon did everything himself. He would not let Tom help. Tom, comfortably wrapped in a blanket, sat and thawed before the fire and wondered what Saxon was made of—steel, whiplcord, or both!

"Makes you a bit peckish, this cold?" smiled Saxon as Tom handed his plate for a third helping of bacon.

"Never was half so hungry in my life before," exclaimed Tom.

"Eat all you can, lad. We've got tough travelling before us. If the frost holds we can do it all right, but I don't like this snow. At this time of year it often means a change."

"It won't be so beastly cold then," said Tom cheerfully.

"Cold—you don't understand, Tom!" exclaimed Saxon. "Frost's our best friend. So long as the snow's hard we can travel on top of it on our snowshoes, while horses break through the crust and move slowly. If I knew the frost would hold another week, I could snap my fingers at Stark. We'd be at Sunk River long before him."

"And if it thaws?" questioned Tom.

"We're in a bad hole, lad. Travelling'll be terribly hard. Worse than that. I'm trusting to cross Wind River on the ice. If it thaws the ice will go out in about three days, and we're done for."

"Can't we get a canoe or build a raft?"

Saxon laughed. "Might as well try to swim it at once. My dear lad, it'll be coming down a banker chock full of broken floes and floating logs. A steamer couldn't live in a Canadian river when the ice is going out."

Saxon was right about the change. It was quite mild next morning, and the sky leaden with cloud. Towards afternoon it began to rain, and the snow turned to a slush, which made travelling fearfully slow and difficult. Lumps of melting snow splashed on their heads from the trees, and soon both were soaked to the skin. When they camped the second night Tom was almost dead with fatigue, but Saxon made him change everything.

"It'll freeze again before morning," he said. And so it did, and, starting before sun-up, they were miles on their way before the snow softened again.

The third day the sun rose hot in a cloudless sky. By ten the warmth was like summer. They were in rough mountainous country now, and the going was shockingly bad.

That afternoon was worse than anything. If Saxon had not helped Tom again and again, the boy would have dropped and lain where he fell.

"I hate to drive you like this, lad," said Saxon remorsefully; "but if we don't reach Wind River early to-morrow we're done. It's as rapid a thaw as I've ever known, and the ice can't be counted on for another twenty-four hours."

"I'm all right," Tom assured him bravely, and staggered along blind with fatigue and aching from head to foot.

That night Saxon chose a deep hollow for their camp. "It's as well to be careful," he said. "I haven't seen any sign of Stark and Co., but it's better not to run any chances of their seeing our fire."

"How far now?" gasped Tom, throwing himself down in a heap.

"Barely twelve miles to the river. Once we're across it we shan't have to rush like this."

Tom made no answer. Glancing down at him, Saxon saw that he was already asleep. "Poor lad!" he muttered. "It's too much for a youngster fresh from home. My word, he's a good plucked 'un. There ain't many would have

kept up with me these last three days." He carefully wrapped Tom in a blanket and set to work to cook supper.

Not a breath of wind was stirring when the sun rose next morning, the sky was deep blue, and the sun shone bright and warm. Already patches of bare earth showed red brown through the fast-decaying drifts. The whole air was a-tinkle with the music of running water.

Under the slushy snow little rivulets seeped along, and the hollows were brimming with deep, still pools.

Presently a sound came dimly through the trees ; a deep, muffled thunder.

They topped a long rise, and the thunder increased to a low, constant roar.

"What's that?" asked Tom at last.

Saxon turned a grave face to his questioner. "The falls, lad. Heaven send we're in time."

Presently Saxon stopped and beckoned Tom to his side. "Look," he said, pointing downwards. And through the serried aisles of red fir trunks Tom caught a glimpse of a wide expanse of greyish ice.

It was the frozen river.

"We're in time, Tom," said Saxon, and the deep relief in his tones made Tom realise how very great had been his anxiety. "But hurry. It may go at any minute."

A few minutes and they were on the bank. The river here was about an eighth of a mile wide. The rough ice which covered it from bank to bank glared like snow in the strong spring sunlight, but here and there were long grey or yellow streaks, and water lay in shallow pools among the hummocks.

"Ice looks pretty rotten," said Tom.

"It is," answered Saxon grimly. "But we've no choice, lad. Come on."

Tom helped to lift the jumper with their stores down the steep, slippery clay bank, and Saxon led the way straight across to the opposite shore.

Now they were on the ice the commotion below fairly frightened Tom. He could hear the imprisoned river growling beneath him like a wild beast waiting for its prey. It even seemed as if the whole mass of the ice itself was lifting and bending beneath his feet.

The surface of the ice was nothing but lumps and hummocks. These swift mountain rivers do not freeze evenly like an English pond.

"Look out, Saxon, you'll have that jumper over," cried Tom.

Saxon righted it sharply, but one bundle, loosely corded, toppled over and rolled in the slush.

"All right," cried Tom. "Don't wait. I'll carry it."

As he stooped there was a sound from the distance like the crack of a huntsman's whip, and something that whirled like a grasshopper zipped past Tom's ear.

"What's that?" cried the boy in surprise, jumping up. Next moment he found himself gripped by Saxon and jerked roughly down behind a hummock.

"I was afraid of it," he heard between Saxon's tight-set lips.

But it was not until a second crack was heard, and a spurt of icy water flew from a puddle a yard away, that Tom realised that someone was using them as a target.

Saxon cast a quick glance at Tom. But the boy had not even changed colour. "Good lad," said Saxon to himself.

Aloud he said, "Keep your head low. Don't move till I tell you." As he spoke he reached back, and, slipping his rifle loose, filled the magazine. It was a new pattern 44-calibre Winchester repeater, and woe betide anything that got in the way of its heavy nickel-pointed bullet.

Twice he raised it over the rough edge of the hummock, and twice a bullet from the unseen marksman smacked into the rotten ice close by.

"It's not a bit o' use," growled Saxon. "The beggar's using cordite, and the sun's too strong to see the flash."

"What are you going to do?" asked Tom. "We can't stick here all day."

"It's a choice between that or being plugged," said Saxon. "This jay with the gun seems to know his job."

"But the ice," urged Tom. "It's jumping enough to make you sea-sick. Suppose it goes."

"Well, that's a chance, and the other's a certainty. It's just on the cards we might separate and bolt for the other bank without being potted. But we'd have to leave the jumper and all our stores. And I'd 'most as soon go over the falls as be turned loose in these woods without tucker or blankets."

"Seems to me we're in a pretty tight fix," said Tom, as an incautious movement brought another bullet whistling just overhead.

Saxon glanced at his watch. "It's past midday, Tom. In six hours the sun'll be down, and with this clear sky it'll be freezing again. If the ice don't go before then we can crawl away in the dark, jumper and all."

"And if the ice don't hold?"

"You won't have long to worry about it, my son. The falls are just round the bend."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there came rolling down the river a sound like the roaring of a heavy train over a bridge.

It grew to a crashing roar, and as it passed underneath both felt the whole ice coat of the river leap like a ship rising to a wave.

At the same moment a great crack appeared between them and the far bank, and through it the brown foam leaped in a fountain.

"That settles it," said Saxon coolly. "Sorry for getting you into this mess, Tom."

CHAPTER VII

WHEN THE ICE WENT OUT

TOM HOLT was as plucky as any clean-bred British country lad, but to say he was not frightened would be straining the truth.

As the ice split and cracked in every direction with a roar like thunder, he was horribly afraid.

The noise alone was simply appalling. It was like one continual discharge of artillery. From bank to bank the enormously thick ice, rotten with the rapid thaw, went to pieces like a pane of glass shattered by a stone, and through the cracks the fast-rising river leaped and gushed in a yellow flood.

Next thing Tom knew he and Saxon were sailing downstream on a great floe.

Slowly at first, then as the ice broke into smaller fragments the floe travelled more and more rapidly. It spun dizzily, grinding and crashing against other floes. Each collision smashed great pieces from it, so that every minute it grew smaller and smaller.

The motion was so evident that it was impossible to stand. Tom and Saxon were forced to lie full length on the surface clutching the hummock which had protected them from the bullets of Stark's rifleman. They were wet to the skin by the shallow waves which swirled across the floe at every collision.

Each moment the deep-toned thunder of the falls grew louder.

Tom, mazed with the fearful uproar and desperate peril, could not even think. A sort of numb despair settled upon him. He wondered vaguely whether death would be long and painful or mercifully swift.

A hand fell upon his shoulder. Saxon was saying something, but though he was evidently shouting, the din of the rending ice was so terrific that Tom could not hear a word.

With his other hand Saxon was pointing towards the shore which they had just left. Tom vaguely followed the direction of the pointing finger. There, on a little knoll at the edge of the forest, stood a tall half-breed, in fur cap and moccasins. He leant motionless on his rifle and calmly watched the two white men sweep down to destruction.

A sudden rage seized Tom. "Shoot him!" he shouted in Saxon's ear.

But the scout shook his head. He put his lips close to Tom's ear. "No good!" he replied. "Moving too fast. And if I did it'd only start him firing again."

Every moment their pace increased, and the faster they went the fiercer were the collisions, and the more rapidly did their ice raft decrease in size.

There was no longer any solid ice left, except here and there a narrow strip under the banks. The whole river was in furious motion, one seething turmoil of broken floes and roaring foam.

They swirled round the bend, and an appalling sight was before them. Less than a quarter of a mile below the whole river broke short off. It was the falls. Fascinated with horror, Tom watched the huge floes whirl towards the brink, tilt upwards, dive out of sight, and vanish instantly.

Beyond the awful verge a mist like thick white smoke hung in a waving curtain against the sky, and round its upper edge was shot with brilliant rainbow hues. The roar that came up from below the white mist shook the very rocks.

The falls were divided into two by a small rocky islet, upon which stood a few leafless bushes. The channel on the

right side was much wider than that on the left, and the floe on which they were travelling was sweeping down the very centre of this wider channel.

Tom was now almost beyond fear. All that remained in his mind was a dreadful curiosity as to what was beyond that edge over which the floes, scores at a time, tilted and dropped into the abyss below. Once he glanced at Saxon's face. It was grave and impressive.

A crash, more violent than any yet. They had dashed into a mass of ice-cakes piled like a small iceberg and drawing so much water as to float more slowly than their own lighter raft.

For a moment they were wedged. Their floe tilted sharply. The water gushed over it in a wave. Both clung like grim death, the icy water washing round their necks. Then the floe rose again. It had cleared the berg and floated once more on a level keel.

But the jumper was gone. So was Saxon's rifle. Everything, in fact, except their two half-drowned, soaking selves.

Tom hardly noticed this. What he did see was that the collision had driven them many yards to the left and flung them so far out of the centre rush as somewhat to check their speed.

Next instant they smashed into a second floe. Their own, weakened with the last collision, split in two, and they had barely time to jump on to the other before the smashed one was driven by the force of the stream clean under their new raft.

Tom saw Saxon spring to his feet. His eyes were on the island. He felt a vague flash of hope. The last collision had swung them far over to the left. They were hardly more than fifty feet from the island.

Alas! They were not fifty yards from the edge of the falls, and though all around them the ice was packed in tumbling, grinding masses, the huge volume of the swollen

river was bearing them with tremendous speed towards the fatal brink.

The big floe, striking another, paused for a second, spinning slowly.

"Come on!" shouted Saxon. His voice rang like a trumpet above the tumult of the roaring flood.

As he spoke he sprang straight and true for the centre of the floe they had struck, and, alighting like a cat, whirled round to give a hand to Tom.

But Tom was already beside him.

"Can you follow me?"

"Yes."

Question and reply followed sharp as pistol-shots.

Next instant Saxon had launched himself across a ten-foot lane of yellow foam, and landed on hands and knees on the slippery side of a peaked hummock of ice.

Tom followed, struck the ice, slipped, clawed furiously, failed to get a hold, and would have dropped back into the seething water but for Saxon's powerful help.

A desperate scramble over the slippery summit of the hummock and they were almost in touching distance of the island.

Tom saw with a spasm of dismay that its side was eight feet of sheer black rock, smooth with the polishings of countless floods. Had they come so far and risked so much to lose all at the last moment?

There was just one place where a ledge gave a possible chance of foothold. Both saw it at once, both braced themselves for the leap. If they missed it, their last chance was gone. Not ten yards further were the falls.

"You first," roared Saxon.

Tom never dreamed of disobeying. With all his strength he hurled himself at the ledge.

For a ghastly half-second he felt he had missed it. Then his chest struck it with a force that knocked every atom of breath out of his body. He drove his nails into a cleft, and hung there gasping, his feet actually in the water.

A thud, and Saxon was beside him, dragged him up to safety, then flung himself down beside the boy, breathing hard.

"Safe!" muttered Tom incredulously as he slowly got up and felt the firm rock beneath his feet.

"I should sit tight a bit if I were you, Tom," answered Saxon quietly. "That chap has the range of us still."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before a bullet pinged past so close that Tom actually felt the wind of it on his cheek.

He dropped instantly, and, following Saxon, crawled away into the protection of the clump of bushes in the centre of the island.

Tom was furious. "The brute! Can't he let us alone, when we've had such a beast of a time getting here!"

Saxon glanced at the boy. "He's Stark's man," he said softly.

"Then Stark had better look out if I ever get close to him," said Tom deliberately.

It was the first threat Saxon had heard the boy utter. He looked at him with interest. Tom's blue eyes were agleam. His face was pale and his lips tight-set.

"Good lad. He means it," was Saxon's thought. But aloud he said: "Don't waste thoughts on Stark. We've got to get ashore, lad."

Tom looked across to the far bank. They were cut off from it by at least fifty yards of raging water and crashing ice. He glanced up to the left. Round the bend swung endless fleets of floes tearing downwards as if racing for the falls.

"Will it freeze up again to-night?" he demanded.

Saxon shook his head. "Not before next autumn, Tom."

"Then how are we to get across?"

Saxon looked pitifully at the boy. "I don't know, Tom."

Tom glanced at the ice again. "How long will it be before that stuff's all gone?"

"Three to four days."

"And after that? Can't we build a raft or something?"

"You forget the current. We should be over the falls. Even a canoe could hardly be driven across from the island to the shore."

Tom made no reply for some minutes. He crouched there behind the bushes with his eyes fixed on the far shore.

"And we've got no food and no blankets," he said in a low voice, as if talking to himself.

Then he turned to Saxon. "How long can chaps live without grub?"

"Depends on their condition. You and I are pretty hard, Tom. We might last a week."

Tom said nothing more. He seemed to Saxon to be thinking hard. As for Saxon, he forgot his own condition in pity for the boy. With his knowledge of the country, he realised most thoroughly the hopelessness of their condition.

They were as completely prisoners on this islet as if they were in the deepest dungeon ever hewn in rock. It would be days before the ice went out, and even then they could not possibly cross to shore. The racing current would dash the strongest swimmer over the falls. Even in a canoe they could hardly hope to face successfully the tremendous power of the rapid river.

They had no food, no cover, the nights were bitterly cold, and, to make matters worse—if they could be worse—Stark's sentinel was waiting on the shore ready to shoot if they gave him half a chance.

Time passed, the sun began to sink over the black, forest-clad hills to the west, and every minute the air grew colder.

Tom Holt's teeth were chattering. They had both been soaked to the skin, and their clothes were beginning to freeze into clanking shields of ice.

"If we'd only got some matches!" muttered Tom at last.

"I've got matches," said Saxon.

"But they're wet."

"Oh, no." And Saxon pulled out a little glass bottle well corked and full of matches.

"There are bushes. Let's light a fire," said Tom.

"You forget our friend with the rifle, Tom. We give him a target."

Tom groaned. "Yes, I forgot."

"Tell you what," said Saxon a moment later. "We *will* have a fire," and he began collecting sticks.

"But you said——" began Tom in wonderment.

"I've thought of a way of tricking Stark's man," chuckled Saxon. "Look here. We'll build one fire on top of that flat rock there, and another down in this little hollow. Number one'll do for the Injun to pot at, and we'll thaw ourselves by number two."

"First class!" exclaimed Tom, and set to work busily. It was delightful to do anything after sitting still so long.

Sure enough, as soon as fire number one was started bullets began smacking in and around it. But Tom and Saxon, crouched in the little hollow, hid the other fire with their bodies and warmed themselves at the same time.

The crash of the ice drowned the reports of the Indian's rifle, but every now and then the sharp thud of a bullet on the rock to the left showed that their enemy was busy.

Saxon stuck his hat up on a long stick, and at a second attempt a bullet sent it flying.

"Pretty useful with his shooting-iron," smiled Saxon.

"He's wasting a jolly lot of cartridges," returned Tom.

"That's a commodity Stark's men are never short of," remarked Saxon drily.

It was almost impossible to talk. The roar of that ever-rising flood was so tremendous that they had to shout to make themselves heard. The whole island literally quivered under the unceasing bombardment of the huge floes which battered it with appalling force.

Suddenly Tom sprang up, pointing. "Look," he shouted. "That'd make a raft if we could only get hold of it."

Saxon, well aware that no raft could help them, watched without much interest the object which Tom had pointed out. It was a huge tree.

Torn from its hold by the flood, it was floating rapidly down the stream on the left-hand side of the island. Its gaunt, bare branches stood out black against the sea of tumbling ice-cakes.

"Afraid it wouldn't help us, Tom, even if we could get hold of it," said Saxon. "Anyhow, it'll be over the falls in another minute."

"Wait! I don't know. Seems to me it's stopping," cried Tom.

"Its lower branches are touching the bottom," replied Saxon. "See, it's rolling over."

Sure enough, the big tree was slowly revolving. Ice floes battered it, but it was so huge and weighty that they hardly seemed to hurry it. It was floating broadside to the stream, and the nearer it approached to the lip of the fall, the more slowly did it move.

"It is stopping!" declared Tom.

He was right. Caught by rocks hidden below the surface of the boiling flood, the great tree had come to a standstill, the yellow water spurting furiously over it as if mad to shift it and fling it into the abyss.

The ice, too, began instantly to pile against it. In less than a minute there was a six-foot ragged wall all across the centre of the channel. In another minute the left-hand fall began to run dry. The water was being diverted into the other channel.

Now Saxon was as excited as Tom. "If only it holds a little longer," he muttered. He turned to Tom. "Be ready!" he cried in his ear. "Follow me."

He slid down to the water's edge. Tom followed, and they stood on the brink of the flood, breathless with excitement.

Every ice floe that struck the tree remained fixed against it. Behind the dam the flood water was piling up, swirling

angrily. The pressure was enormous. It was plainly only a question of minutes before the dam and everything must give way.

The risk was frightful. The passage over the jagged tops of the slippery floes was desperately difficult, and if the dam went while they were on it nothing in the world could save them.

But any risk was better than the certainty of dying by inches of cold and hunger on the island. Saxon's keen eye watched for the proper moment.

"Now!" he roared, and sprang on to the perilous bridge of ice.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LONELY HUT

IF he lives to be a hundred Tom Holt will never forget the passage of the ice bridge on Wind River.

The bare rocks of the island to the left, the muddy flood brimming to the right and spurting through every cranny of the ice wall in brown fountains. The wild springs from one ice point to the next, with the absolute certainty that one false step meant death.

Above all, the desperate need for haste.

Twice Tom slipped, and twice Saxon turned and steadied him. And, just as they were nearing the shore, an ice block, weighing many tons, fell away under Saxon's weight, and Tom, clinging desperately to an overhanging branch of a tree, saved his friend from dropping sheer over the lip of the precipice.

It was over at last. Saxon sprang from the last floe to the shore, and, turning, pulled Tom up beside him. Before either could say a word there was a crash like thunder, and the tree that formed the dam, forced from its anchorage by the enormous weight of water piled behind it, rolled over and, crushed under thousands of tons of ice, dropped with an appalling roar into the foaming abyss below.

Tom shuddered as he watched it disappear. Then he followed Saxon into the depths of the forest.

As soon as they were well out of sight of Stark's sentinel on the opposite bank, Saxon stopped. "Tom," he said gravely, "we've had the most extraordinary streak of luck.

Getting off the island like that was a chance in ten thousand. But it wouldn't be fair to let you think that we're anywhere near safe yet. We're not."

"Can't we get shelter anywhere?" asked Tom.

"Not within forty miles. At least, that's the nearest I know of."

"Forty miles to a meal!" exclaimed Tom in dismay.

"That's about the size of it. Now, this is my idea. I vote we take the trail all night. We can keep warm walking, and we ought to be able to do twenty miles. In the morning we can sleep in the sun for a few hours, and push on again about midday. The question is, are you up to an all-night tramp?"

"I'd sooner walk than lie and dream about the supper I didn't eat," replied Tom stoutly. "One comfort, we can walk at our ease now. We've got Wind River between us and Stark."

Saxon took Tom by the arm and turned him round. He pointed through a rift in the trees to the high ground on the other side of the river. "See that?" he said.

"That smoke, you mean?" asked Tom wonderingly. "Rum sort of fire that must be. Look, the smoke's rising in little round clouds!"

"That's the way Indians talk, lad," said Saxon. "The half-breed's telling someone on this side the river that we've got across. He does it by lighting a fire of damp leaves and stopping the smoke with his blanket. We're not done with Stark's crowd yet."

"And we've got no guns now," said Tom ruefully.

"I've got my pistol still," replied Saxon quietly. "With that and matches and my little pocket compass we'll make out somehow."

Tom had thought those forced marches on the three previous days bad enough. They were not a patch on this night tramp. Then there was light to see where to put one's feet, and a good supper and warm bed in prospect.

Now it was only faint starlight, for the moon had not yet risen, and it was freezing so sharply that the half-melted snow banks were glazed with ice, on which Tom's nailed boots slipped in every direction. Both he and Saxon had lost their snowshoes in crossing the river.

But the worst of it all was hunger. They had had nothing to eat since breakfast, and the sharp air made Tom ravenous.

The boy had fared hard all his life, but at any rate he had had enough. He had never before gone fourteen hours without a mouthful. He had a nasty sinking, empty feeling which, as the hours passed, turned to faintness.

His legs felt like lead, and he lifted them mechanically as he tramped along close behind Saxon through the intense stillness of the frozen forest.

How Saxon found his way was a miracle. He never faltered or hesitated, yet Tom could not see the vestige of a trail.

"Forty miles!" muttered Tom at last. "Forty miles to grub and shelter! And I don't suppose we've done ten yet. How shall I stick it out?"

Saxon turned. "Fagged, Tom? Like to take an easy?" he said kindly.

But Tom was clear grit. "I'm all right," he declared. "Keep on."

Another mile. The woods were very thick, and it was darker than ever under the heavy branches of the great black fir trees. Suddenly Saxon stopped. He was sniffing the air like a hound at fault.

"Smell anything, Tom?" he asked.

Tom sniffed. "Aye, smoke," he replied.

"Where there's smoke there's folk," said Saxon, slightly altering the old proverb.

"Stark's people?" questioned Tom in a whisper.

"Maybe. We'll find out." He wet his forefinger and held it up.

"Breeze nor'-west, what there is of it," he said. "This way, then."

He turned sharp to the right, and made his way silently as a cat down a slope. Presently they entered a thicket of juniper and hemlock. The ground below was flat and marshy and soft, in spite of the frost.

"Here's a path," whispered Saxon. "I'll go first. Keep close behind and stop if I do."

"Ah, I thought as much," muttered Saxon presently, as he pulled up abruptly. "Barbed wire, Tom. Look out!"

Three strands of barbed wire were twisted in a regular entanglement across the path. Saxon felt them with his fingers.

"Bit fishy, isn't it?" said Tom.

"It is," replied Saxon. "Shall we go back, Tom? I leave it entirely to you."

"No," said Tom desperately. "I'd face Stark's whole outfit for a chunk of bread and a cup of hot coffee."

"Good lad!" laughed Saxon. "That's the way I feel."

They crossed the wires carefully, and a few yards beyond entered a small clearing, in the middle of which, sheltered on all sides by thick trees, stood a stout-looking shack of unsquared logs.

Through an unshuttered window a warm glow of firelight poured into the bitter night.

"Good chance to see what's inside," smiled Saxon, creeping up to the window. Tom followed. The clay-floored room had only one occupant, a smallish man with a thin, mean face and a ragged beard. He wore blue jean trousers and a thick black flannel shirt. He was standing by the fire stirring a big black pot which hung over it.

The savoury smell from that pot literally made Tom's mouth water. It was venison stew, and Tom felt he would have faced a legion of evil spirits for just one plateful.

After one glance Saxon drew Tom aside. "I don't know the fellow," he whispered.

"Think he's one of Stark's chaps?"

"Can't say. He's not exactly a beauty, in any case."

"He's only one," said Tom. "We can easily sit on him if he turns ugly."

"I warn you there may be more," said Saxon. "Indeed, I'm sure there are, for that pot on the fire holds enough for three."

"Enough for you and me, anyhow," said Tom recklessly.

This was enough for Saxon. He walked softly to the door, and without knocking lifted the latch and opened swiftly.

"Good evening," he said quietly.

Quick as a flash the man dropped his spoon and spun round, while his right hand flew to his hip pocket.

Quick as he was, Saxon was a thought quicker. Before the fellow could pull his pistol Saxon's weapon was levelled at his head.

The bearded man stood motionless, the picture of angry fright.

Saxon laughed. "Nice, hospitable sort of chap you are!" he remarked coolly. "Do you usually shoot strangers at sight?"

"What do yew mean by comin' in without knockin'?" retorted the other with a snarl. "What do yew want, anyhow, this time o' night?"

Tom, watching the man, saw that he was horribly frightened. He wondered why.

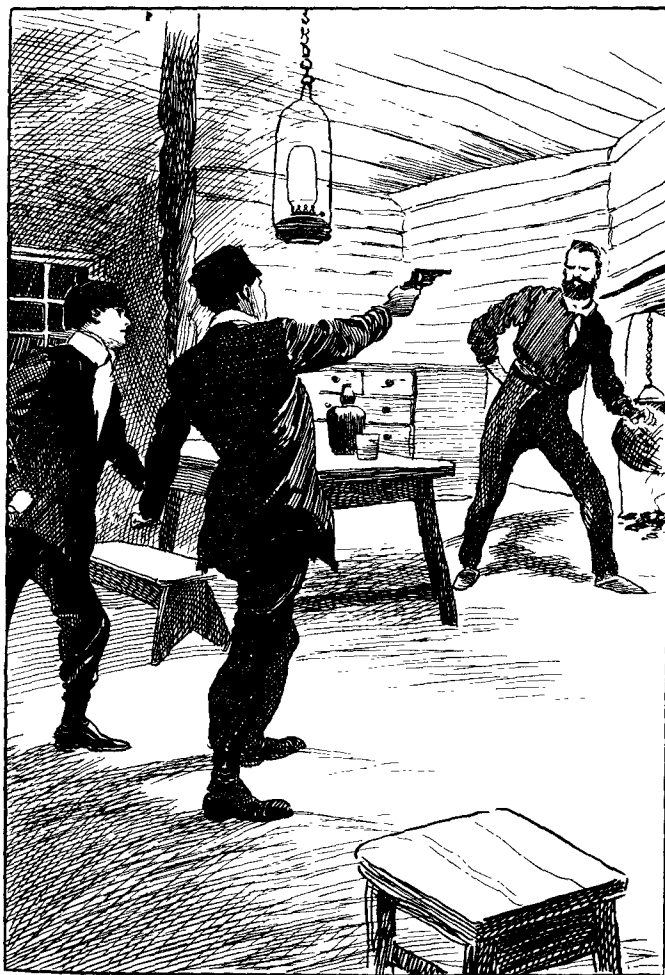
"If you look at us," replied Saxon, "you'll see what we want. Supper and shelter."

The fellow hesitated.

"Oh, I'll pay," exclaimed Saxon, and pulled out a five-dollar bill.

"All right," growled the man. "Ye kin hev some grub. Set down."

Never in all his life had Tom enjoyed food so much as that big platter of stewed venison, with its thick gravy, and the cup of steaming black coffee which followed it. There was no milk, and sugar was represented by molasses—"long sweet-



*Before the fellow could pull his pistol Saxon's weapon
was levelled at his head.*

ening," they call it in the backwoods—but it was nectar to frozen, half-starved Tom Holt.

The man's furtive eyes were on them all the time. At last he said to Saxon, in a voice that was half apologetic, "Sorry I pulled on yew, mister. We don't often hev strangers here."

"I should reckon not," said Saxon. "If I hadn't smelt your smoke I shouldn't have found the place in a week."

"For a fact, yew do look as ef yew'd had a pretty rough time," observed the other. "I reckon yew'll be glad to sleep some. There's straw in the loft, an' I kin give ye a couple o' blankets."

Saxon thanked him civilly, and he and Tom climbed the notched pole which served as ladder, scrambled through a narrow trap-door, and found themselves in a low-roofed loft under the shingles. The floor was of unnailed boards, so loose that the firelight from below glowed strongly through the chinks, but in the corner was a great heap of resinous pine-needles.

"There's your straw, Tom," said Saxon. "Nothing makes a better bed. Curl up and sleep hard. We've got to turn out early."

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Voices wakened Tom. He sat up sharply. The firelight glowed strongly as ever through the chinks in the boards, and the first thing that Tom saw was Saxon flat on his face in the middle of the floor.

He was lying quite still, and evidently listening intently.

There were two people talking below. They were speaking in low voices, and Tom could not distinguish words.

Suddenly a third man spoke. He had a peculiarly harsh, penetrating voice. "There ain't no use taking risks," he said sharply. "I ain't that kind of a fool. What I sez is, fix 'em."

Tom felt his blood run cold. There was no doubt in his

mind what "Fix 'em" meant. The men below were plotting deliberately to murder Saxon and himself.

Tom got up noiselessly and crawled carefully across the creaking boards to Saxon's side.

Saxon looked up, and there was a very grim smile on his rugged face. "Nice nest of hornets we've stumbled into, lad," he whispered.

"So they're Stark's men?" replied Tom, in the same low tone.

"I'm not sure," said Saxon. He held up his hand. "Listen!" he whispered.

"I reckon they wouldn't hev walked right in like they hev done if they was Government men," said a big, gaunt, hollow-cheeked fellow.

"Best be on the safe side," said another, an ugly little beast with pink eyes like a ferret.

"What I say is, Finish 'em. Then there won't be no trouble."

"I ain't saying as 'tisin't the best plan," returned the big brute cautiously. "We don't want no talk, anyway."

"Yew'll hev to be mighty keerful," put in the ragged-bearded fellow, whom they had first seen. "They're big, hefty fellers, both on 'em. It'll hev to be done while they're asleep, and don't yew forget it."

"Don't yew be skeered, Pratt," said another, who had not spoken yet. "There ain't going to be no gun play." As he spoke he pulled out a big knife, the blade of which glittered in the firelight, and began stropping it softly on his boot.

Tom shuddered. "The brute! He looks as if he'd enjoy butchering us," he muttered.

"We're not quite helpless, Tom," returned Saxon. "Thank goodness, there are five dry cartridges in my pistol."

"But they'll rush us," whispered Tom. "What can we do against four of 'em?"

"I guess not," replied Saxon, with a slight drawl. He seemed so confident that Tom took courage. At the same

time, he could not for the life of him see how they could possibly hope to come out of it. The men below were four to two. They all had pistols and knives, while Saxon and he had only one pistol and one knife between them.

"Pratt, yew go up the ladder, an' see ef they're asleep," said the pink-eyed man.

Pratt, Tom observed, was plainly nervous, but all the same he obeyed.

At a motion from Saxon, Tom crawled back to the pine straw. Saxon followed.

Presently Pratt's ugly head appeared above the level of the trap-door. He saw two motionless figures wrapped in their blankets, and heard both breathing deep and steadily. He gave a sigh of relief, and they heard him lumber cautiously back down the notched pole.

He was no sooner out of sight than Saxon was up again. He crawled across to his peep-hole quietly as a cat. Not a single creak came from the loose boards. Tom followed.

"Sound as beavers," Pratt told the others below. "Who's a-going to do it?"

"I ain't pertiklar," said the man with the knife. "But yew'll all hev to come up, so as to be ready ef thet big chap wakes."

The cold-blooded brutality of the man made Tom's skin crawl. "We might be pigs he was going to slaughter," he whispered in Saxon's ear.

"Reckon we'll treat 'em to a little surprise party," returned Saxon grimly. "They've forgotten these boards aren't nailed."

As he spoke he softly lifted a loose end, making a hole, through which the fireglow streamed upwards into the dark recesses of the loft.

Through the aperture Saxon pushed his pistol.

"Hands up!" he suddenly roared in a voice of thunder.

If the situation had not been so serious Tom could have laughed at the expressions of utter dismay depicted on the

faces below as they stared upwards at the black, threatening muzzle of Saxon's heavy revolver.

All but one. The butcher, if a brute, had pluck. He sprang up, pulling a pistol from his hip pocket as he did so.

Quick as he was, Saxon was quicker. His pistol cracked, the heavy report nearly deafening Tom.

The man below staggered back and fell against the table, man and table together going down with a crash. His pistol, dropping from his hand, slid across the clay floor and lay just in front of the fireplace. His right arm was doubled beneath him.

"I'm a fair shot," announced Saxon, in a clear, cool voice. "I've only winged that chap. It'll be sudden death for the next that moves."

The remaining three stood still as if frozen. They seemed afraid to breathe. The intense silence was broken only by the groans of the wounded man and the snap and crackle of the log fire.

"What now?" asked Tom sharply.

"Git with all speed," was the curt reply.

"We can't. They'll pot us as we go down the pole."

"Yes, if we both go together. Look here, Tom, have you the nerve to go down and disarm 'em while I keep 'em covered?"

"I think so," Tom answered modestly.

Saxon noted with satisfaction that the boy's voice was perfectly steady.

"Right. When you're down, first collar the pistol which lies on the floor. Then you're safe as a house. Take their shooting-irons from the other three. They'll be in their hip pockets. When you've done that, go over and stand by the door and cover 'em while I come down."

Tom got up coolly and walked to the trap-door.

"Keep mighty still, all of you!" commanded Saxon grimly.

The wounded man on the floor hissed back an oath, but the others were still and silent as statues.

Tom swung himself through the trap-door, hung a second, and dropped lightly to the floor below. He kept his eyes steadily on the men as he walked forward to where the fallen pistol lay.

If looks could have killed, Tom Holt would have died then and there. The four glared at him like wild beasts ready to spring. He felt intensely relieved when he had the pistol safe in his hand.

He had never used a pistol in his life, hardly ever handled one. But he reflected that these fellows were not to know that, and he stepped boldly up to Pratt.

"Keep still!" he ordered gruffly. The man quivered all over. For a moment Tom thought he would spring at him.

But whatever he thought he did not show it, and his hand was steady as a rock as he held his pistol to Pratt's head and quickly took the man's six-shooter away.

He did the same with the other two, then stepped across to the door and stood there.

Now was the crucial moment. Tom realised that the men knew him for a tenderfoot. If they made a rush while Saxon dropped from the loft he was more than doubtful of the upshot.

But, boy as he was, his cool bearing completely overawed the scoundrels. They made no move.

All the same, Tom breathed more freely when Saxon was safe in the lower room. He noticed that the scout had brought with him the two blankets, and felt a glow of admiration that his friend could think of such a trifle at a moment like this.

"Keep 'em covered," said Saxon loudly. "I'll have to trouble you for the rest of your supper, my friends," he continued, turning to a cupboard. "I've paid five dollars, and I'm going to take the worth of it."

Saxon opened the cupboard, took two loaves, a piece of bacon, a bottle of spirits, some coffee, and salt, and was dropping them into an old flour bag when Tom through

the open door distinctly heard a movement outside the house.

It sounded like footsteps at a little distance.

A thrill of fear shook him. Were there more of the gang outside? If so, he and Saxon were in a pretty mess.

He must tell Saxon. How was he to do it without rousing the suspicions of the others?

He decided it was impossible. He must wait.

Saxon had filled his bag. He rolled it in the blankets, coolly tied the bundle with a piece of cord, and fastened the pack on his back.

"Don't try any rushing," he remarked coolly as he backed towards the door. "If you do, some of you are liable to get hurt. Tom, I reckon we'd better tie 'em."

"I wouldn't wait," replied Tom, in a steady voice.

Something in his tone gave Saxon to understand that all was not well. He came close to the boy.

"Others outside," Tom told him in a rapid whisper, so low no one else heard it.

"Close?" asked Saxon, in an equally low tone.

"Not very," replied Tom.

"Slip out of the door. Bend down. Go into the woods to the right of the path. Lie down, and wait for me."

With beating heart Tom obeyed. He fully expected that his appearance outside the door would be the signal for a volley. To his surprise nothing of the sort happened. All was perfectly quiet as, bent double, he glided in among the thick trunks.

"Suppose it wasn't anything," he muttered to himself, as he wound silently in and out through the dark thicket. His feet splashed into water, and he pulled up sharply. He was on the edge of a muddy, weed-grown pool, the surface of which, skimmed with cat ice, glimmered dully in the starlight.

Crack! A stick snapped.

Was it Saxon? No, for Saxon walked more carefully.

Besides, the sound came from a distance. From the direction of the path, Tom thought.

All his suspicions revived, Tom crouched low behind a fallen tree.

A tiny rustle, and a square-set figure came gliding silently towards him. Tom clutched his pistol and waited.

"Tom!" came a whisper. Tom heaved a sigh of relief. It was Saxon. Next moment his friend was beside him.

"You're right," whispered Saxon. "There's someone else in the swamp."

"Who?"

"Can't say. Sh! They're coming!"

They were. Tom heard stealthy footsteps along the path. Dusky figures came creeping by. Tom counted half a dozen.

A guttural voice gave a low-toned order. There was a sudden rush of feet.

CHAPTER IX

HANDS UP !

A LOUD crash echoed through the sleeping woods as the door of the hut was suddenly slammed to.

A brisk volley of revolver-shots instantly followed. The flashes gleamed in stabs of fire through the gloom, and by their light Tom and Saxon caught glimpses of the new-comers grouped loosely at the edge of the cleared ground.

"They're attacking the hut," gasped Tom. "This is a rum go, Saxon. Who are they ? "

"That's what I want to find out, lad."

"Hadn't we better clear ? " suggested Tom.

"We're safe enough here. They didn't see us come out, and if it's us they're after, they think we're still in the shack."

"Us ! Are they Stark's men ? "

"Exactly what I want to find out."

A fresh volley rang out from the attacking party.

"Pity we didn't leave those chaps their pistols," whispered Tom.

"We didn't take 'em all, that's plain," replied Saxon.

"Two of 'em are firing from the hut. See ? "

As he spoke one of the attacking party gave a horrid cry, and they heard his body thud as he fell.

Saxon began to creep on hands and knees back to the very edge of the cleared ground.

"He's crazy to run his head into it like that ! " muttered Tom. But all the same he followed.

It was only a few yards. Saxon took up his position

behind a small dead tree that lay close by the spot where the path through the swamp entered the clearing.

He lay flat, with his head just above the log, and Tom crouched beside him.

The attacking party had dropped back, and for the moment all was still.

"Bring a log. We'll hev to smash that there door down," growled someone who was evidently leader of the attacking party.

The starlight was too dim to distinguish faces, but Tom could see the figures of the five remaining men.

Two of them came running towards the path.

"Back a bit, Tom!" whispered Saxon. "They're coming our way."

He glided away silently as a snake. It was a marvel to Tom how the big, burly man could move so noiselessly. He followed, and his heart beat quickly when the two men, groping in the dim light, actually seized the very log behind which he and Saxon had been sheltering.

They staggered back with it towards the shack. Two of their companions took hold, one on each side, there was a low word of command, and then a sudden rush.

Instantly the firing broke out again from the hut. The defenders had cut loopholes on each side of the door, and from these spits of flame flashed viciously.

But the men with the log came on at a double. There followed a terrific crash; the door, struck full in the centre, burst to pieces.

A fresh cry of agony. "There's another down!" exclaimed Tom, as one of the attackers sprang into the air and then collapsed.

"More the better," growled Saxon. "Hope they'll exterminate one another like the Kilkenny cats."

"They're in the hut!" cried Tom, wildly excited.

"Not so loud!" muttered Saxon, as his vice-like grip fell on the boy's arm and pulled him down.

A desperate battle was raging inside the hut. The noise was terrific. Howls and screams, the sharp crack of pistol-shots, and the dull thud of heavy blows.

"Sounds as if the whole show was going to bits!" said Tom.

All of a sudden there was a terrific explosion inside the hut, followed by a vivid flash of blue flame.

It was so sudden that Tom jumped violently, and Saxon had a second time to pull him down.

Instantly the whole hut was afire. Liquid flame gushed from door and window. In colour it was an intense blue.

"What is it?" gasped Tom.

"Spirit. They're moonshiners. That explains it."

"Moonshiners? What are they?"

"Illicit distillers. This is a prohibition country. Government allows no whisky. This gang has a secret still. Probably in the cellar. The whisky casks have caught."

Tom barely listened. His gaze was fixed in fascinated horror on the hut. Each instant the blaze rose higher. The hut was one seething furnace, the light of which made the whole clearing bright as day.

From inside came ghastly shrieks—shrieks so awful that Tom's flesh crept as he listened.

Next moment two men burst from the blazing door. The first was small and slight. Plainly one of the attacking party, for Tom had not seen him before.

Close at his heels rushed Pratt, brandishing a hatchet.

Pratt looked like a demon from the pit. His face was black and scorched, his hair and beard had been completely burnt off. His clothes were all aflame.

The smaller man had no weapon. He made straight for the mouth of the path. He was running for dear life. In the fierce light of the blazing building Tom could plainly see the terror in his glaring eyes.

Pratt was gaining. He gave a yell of triumph. The hunted man heard, and in sheer desperation switched sharply to the

right and dashed into the woods exactly opposite the spot where Tom and Saxon lay hid.

He ran almost over them without seeing them. Pratt gained at every step.

"Can't stand that!" cried Tom, and just as Pratt was upon them he sprang up, and, flinging out a long arm, seized the moonshiner by one leg.

At the pace Pratt was travelling the result of this manoeuvre was—for Pratt—disastrous. He flew into the air and came down on his head with a force which, if the ground had not been soft, would undoubtedly have broken his neck. As it was, he lay still enough.

At the same moment there was a tremendous splash close behind them.

"Hang on to Pratt, Tom!" cried Saxon. "T'other chap's gone into the pool."

Tom glanced at Pratt, saw that he was beyond harm for the present, flung the hatchet aside, and dashed after Saxon.

Even here among the thick trees it was quite light. The fierce glare from the blazing hut fell on the half-frozen surface of the black pool, and sent flickering shadows dancing among the dark trunks which surrounded it.

As Tom reached the treacherous edge of the swampy water a head appeared a few feet from the bank, and a strangled voice gasped, "Help!" The man clawed the water wildly, but did not seem able to make any progress.

"I'll wade out and give him a hand," cried Tom.

"You'll stay there if you do," returned Saxon gruffly. "The mud's like quicksand."

"I seenk, I seenk!" screamed the man, in a queer, high-pitched voice.

"Keep quiet, you idiot! I'll get you out!" cried Saxon.

The man obeyed, but his face was piteous. No wonder, for, as Tom saw plainly, he was sinking steadily in the horrible

slough. Big bubbles rose around him and burst greasily with a foul odour of marsh gas.

Saxon gripped a sapling fir which grew a few feet away from the edge of the bank. He threw all his weight on it, and gradually bent it over till its bushy top hung directly over the drowning man.

It was too stiff for one man to bend quite over. Tom saw this and threw his weight on it, and in a moment it was within reach of the man in the water.

"Catch hold!" shouted Saxon. The wretched man grasped it with the energy of despair.

"Now slacken away gently, Tom."

Out came the fellow like a cork from a tight bottle, and as the sapling swung him up Saxon reached out, caught him by the slack of his breeches, and lifted him ashore as easily as a cat carries a kitten.

The moment the man's feet were on firm ground he made a frantic but feeble attempt to bolt. But Saxon's grip fell on his collar, and swung him round with his face to the light.

"Jacques Dubois!" Tom had never yet heard that tone from Saxon.

Dead silence. The rescued man stood in front of his rescuer with downcast eyes. He was a little man with a brown face. He was covered from head to foot with black, stinking slime, he was shivering with the cold. Tom had never seen a more deplorable figure.

"What are you doing here?" Saxon's voice was very stern.

No answer. Tom could plainly hear the man's teeth chattering.

"Very well. I don't want an answer. Go!"

Dubois hesitated; then, to Tom's intense dismay, suddenly dropped to the ground, sobbing as though his very heart would break.

Tom glanced at Saxon. But Saxon's eyes were on the man on the ground.

At last Dubois lifted a blackened face, down which the tears had ploughed white channels. "I would nevaire have come eef I had known eet was you, Monsieur Saxon," he exclaimed. "By Gol, I would not!"

"Doesn't look a very desperate scoundrel," said Tom to himself, as he watched the little man curiously. "What a rum lingo he talks. Must be one of those French-Canadian chaps."

Saxon glanced pitifully at the miserable figure. "I left you in good work at the logging camp," he said. "How do you come here?"

"Eet was ze cards. I gamble. I lose. Stark, he lend me ze money. Zen he made me leave ze camp. Zen——" Dubois finished with a shrug which spoke volumes.

"Stark—I might have known it!" growled Saxon. "One more score to settle when we meet."

Tom heard a rustle near by. Pratt was moving—trying to crawl away. Tom sprang at him and flung him down and sat on him.

"Better tie him," said Saxon. "Mind you make a good job of it. He's a slippery customer."

Tom had cord in his pocket. Saxon had taught him never to move without it. While Pratt struggled feebly, Tom tied him up tight as a registered letter.

Dubois was shivering miserably with the cold. His teeth were chattering violently. Saxon collected wood, and, crossing to the burning hut, brought back some glowing timber. Very soon a good fire was blazing.

While he did this Dubois crept close to Tom. "I sank you for saving me from heem," he said humbly, pointing to Pratt. "Vat ees your name?"

"I'm Tom Holt."

Saxon heard, and broke in sternly. "Yes, nephew of my best friend, and of a man who was kind to you."

Dubois looked deeply ashamed. "Stark, he say that it was a sham who come—vat you call bogus man; that he vas not

Monsieur Holt's nephew at all, and zat old Holt had sold heem Sunk River."

"You ought to have known Stark better than to believe a pack of nonsense like that," replied Saxon. "Come nearer to the fire, and tell us what you know. Have you heard anything of Tom's father?"

Dubois started. "Is it hees father zat Stark send for from England?"

"So you've heard?"

Dubois glanced round in sudden terror. "You veel not say zat I tell you?" he asked imploringly.

"You know me better than that," retorted Saxon.

"Ah, but you do not know Stark. Eef he hear zat I betray heem he skin me alive."

"He's not going to have the chance," said Saxon comfortingly. "You're coming with us. Now fire ahead. In the first place, has Stark any more men hereabouts besides those?" He pointed significantly to the blazing ruins.

Dubois shook his head.

"Then it was you who answered the half-breed's signals?"

"Yes, but I did not know zat it was you. Stark say it was ze boy he want."

"Aye, that's Stark all over. He wouldn't mention me because he knew you and I had been pals." He turned to Tom. "Just the sort of joke that would please Stark all to pieces, to set Dubois after me."

"The brute!" growled Tom.

"Where's he taking Tom's father?" Saxon asked Dubois.

"To ze Black Hills."

"Phew! Pretty travelling this sort of weather? D'ye know exactly where?"

Dubois shook his head again. "Zere is only five or seex who knows. It ees a cave vair high up in ze mountain, and ze path ees secret."

Tom listened with intense interest. It seemed madly impossible that his poor father—the quiet, hard-working English

farmer—should be carried away by this gang of desperadoes to a secret hiding-place in the wild mountains of the North-West. But, after all, so many extraordinary things had happened in the past three weeks that the boy was prepared to believe almost anything.

Saxon was looking thoughtful. "Any chance of cutting him off before he reaches this pass?" he asked. "We've got a longish start by taking this short cut."

"If ze river stop heem, it ees possible," replied Dubois. "But 'ow did you cross ze Wind River?"

Saxon told him.

"Eet was one grand escape," said Dubois, with eyes of amazement. "But it ees vat you call tempting ze Providence to go against Stark wiz only we three."

"That's as may be. We've got to do it," replied Saxon sternly.

Silence settled. The fire crackled cheerily in the cold air. The hut was now a mere smouldering mass of ruins. The man Pratt lay quiet where they had left him. Saxon had been careful that he should be out of earshot while they talked. As for Tom, he was quietly taking stock of Dubois.

It seemed to him extraordinary that this man, who an hour before had been head of a band thirsting for his life and Saxon's, was now one of themselves. Well, Saxon allowed it. That was good enough for him.

It was Dubois who spoke first. "Eet is one grand stake to play for," he remarked thoughtfully.

"What is?" asked Saxon sharply.

Dubois looked at him wonderingly. "Ze gold," he replied.

"Gold! What gold?" cried Saxon, starting up.

"Ees it possible zat you do not know?" exclaimed Dubois in surprise.

"I know of no gold." Saxon was staring at Dubois. Tom had never yet seen his friend show such excitement.

"Zen, vat for, sink you, Stark want ze Sunk River?"

"Exactly what's been puzzling me. I might have thought

it was gold, but I've washed the river sand again and again and found no trace of colour."

"Ah, but ze gold ees not in ze river," exclaimed Dubois. "Not in ze river vere it runs now. It ees in ze old bed of ze river vere she used to run 'undreds of years ago."

"In the old bed?" muttered Saxon, frowning. "I never thought of that. How did Stark find it?"

Dubois gave his expressive shrug. "I do not know. He has ze spies everywhere. Eet may be zat he went zere heemself."

Tom had been listening in wide-eyed amazement. "Gold at Sunk River! Is there much?"

Dubois turned to him. "Stark, he would not take so much trouble if zere was not much gold," he said quietly.

"That's true," remarked Saxon thoughtfully. "Tom, this is a bigger thing than I thought."

Tom could find no words to reply. Long after they stopped talking, and, rolled in their blankets, were lying silent by the fire, he lay awake, too excited to sleep.

Gold! He had read of gold, dreamt of it; but to realise that it was there, lying in the sands of the old river bed, on land which actually belonged to his father and himself, was too much for him.

He went to sleep with thoughts running through his head of the wonderful time he would have when he came into his own.

The sun was well above the trees when they awoke, and hot coffee was simmering over the fire. Dubois had brought in his camp kit from where he had left it outside the swamp.

Dubois was doing cook, and, like most Frenchmen, he was a wonderful hand at the work. Tom had seldom enjoyed a meal more.

"Thirty miles to do to-day," said Saxon, who was on his knees, packing his roll. "Time we were off."

Tom fancied he heard a slight rustle in the thick brush

between them and the swamp pool. He glanced up. Too late.

“ Hands up ! ” came a sharp command. The muzzles of at least half a dozen carbines stuck out of the bushes and covered them beyond hope of escape.

CHAPTER X

PRISONERS OF THE N.W.M.P.

BEFORE any of the three could speak or move the bushes parted, and a stiff, square-built man with a black moustache strode out.

"You are my prisoners," he said coolly. "Hand over your guns."

"And who in thunder are you?" demanded Saxon.

"Sergeant Glanfield, of the North-West Mounted Police," returned the other sharply. "None of your bluff now. Keep your hands up." His manner was offensive to a degree.

"May I be permitted to ask what we are charged with, Sergeant Glanfield, of the North-West Mounted Police?" inquired Saxon. His tone was quietly sarcastic.

Glanfield laughed harshly. "You've got cool cheek, my man. But don't think to bluff me. You'll hear what you're charged with when you get to Fort Victoria."

"I haven't the faintest intention of going to Fort Victoria," replied Saxon. "My business lies elsewhere. And I have every right to insist on learning the charge against my friends and myself."

The sergeant's temper rose. There was an ugly glitter in his eyes. "You infernal moonshiner!" he exclaimed hotly.

Saxon laughed. "Oh, now I begin to understand. You take me for one of the gang who recently inhabited that"; and he pointed to the ashes of the hut.

"Well, of all the impudent scoundrels——" began Glanfield.

Saxon made a step towards him. He looked so dangerous that the sergeant jumped back, shouting, "Keep still or I'll shoot!"

Tom broke in. "We are not moonshiners, Sergeant Glanfield," he said sharply. "This is Mr. Saxon and my name's Holt. He and I are just from England."

Glanfield swung round and glared at Tom.

"Fresh from England. You do look a tenderfoot, but this man's not English"—pointing to Saxon—"and who's this?"—turning on Dubois.

The little French-Canadian shot a peculiar look at Tom. Tom stopped with Dubois' name on the tip of his tongue.

"My name ees Homard," said Dubois. "I am ze guide. I travel wiz Messieurs Holt and Saxon."

Glanfield looked angrier than ever. "You're an ingenious pack of liars!" he sneered. "And what's this, pray?"—pointing a knotty forefinger at the wretched Pratt.

"He's a moonshiner right enough," replied Tom. "The last of 'em."

"You see," went on Tom, "we lost our kit crossing the river yesterday. We took refuge in the hut, and the fellows there must have taken us for Government detectives, for they tried to murder us. We escaped, and just then some other fellows came up and attacked the hut. They set it on fire and the end of it was only two—that is one"—Tom corrected himself in a hurry—"escaped."

Glanfield gave an ugly laugh. "That story don't do much credit to your imagination, young fellow. It's about the thinnest I ever listened to."

"It's perfectly true, all the same," said Saxon, who was quite calm again.

Glanfield gave him a look of disdain. He stepped across to where Pratt, with his hands tied fast behind him, was lying on the ground.

Glanfield's men had come out of covert. Five of them, hard-bitten, soldierly-looking chaps, stood round with their

carbines at the ready. Though their sergeant was in mufti they were all in the khaki undress uniform of their famous corps. A smarter-looking lot Tom had never seen.

"They seem decent chaps," thought Tom. "Wonder how they come to have such a brute of a sergeant." If he had only known it, Sergeant Glanfield was about the most unpopular man in the corps. He was brave enough, but pig-headed and pompous and narrow to a degree. One of those men who flatter themselves that, when they have once made up their minds, they never change their opinion.

One of the troopers untied Pratt. He stood up stiffly, a repulsive object with his scanty beard singed to the roots and his face and hands black as a nigger's with smoke. He had rudely refused Saxon's kind offer of a wash.

He glanced round with his little shifty eyes.

"Looks exactly like a trapped fox!" Tom thought to himself.

"Now, my man, what have you got to say?" demanded Glanfield.

"What do I get fer it. That's what I want to know?" said Pratt. "Do I get anything fer telling of the truth?"

"It always tells in the prisoner's favour," replied Glanfield encouragingly. "I'll see you don't lose by it when we get to head-quarters."

Pratt glanced revengefully in Saxon's direction.

"Right!" he said. "Ef that's so, I'll tell yew the hull story. 'Twas all a pack o' lies what thet long feller said"—pointing to Tom. "They was all in it 'cept him"—indicating Dubois—"an' he's one o' Stark's men, an' come sneaking round last night to blackmail us. Then we had a row, an' in the fight the lamp got upset, an' the hull place burnt down, whisky an' all."

Again the man looked spitefully at Tom and Saxon as if to say, "Now I've cooked your goose for you."

Glanfield's smug face showed extreme satisfaction.

"Ha! now I think we're getting much nearer it," he

observed complacently. "I felt sure these fellows were lying."

"Do you mean you're going to take that creature's word before ours?" There was infinite contempt in Saxon's tone. He turned to the troopers. "Don't any of you know me? I'm Saxon—Strong-hand Saxon they call me."

"Strong-hand Saxon—I've heard of him," exclaimed a bright-faced young fellow very little older than Tom.

"Have you seen him, Ryder?" demanded Glanfield roughly.

"Never," replied Ryder. "But I've——"

"Then keep your head shut. I'm satisfied these are the men we want. Put the bracelets on 'em, and march 'em out to where the horses are picketed."

"You're making a big mistake, Sergeant Glanfield," said Saxon quietly. "A mistake you'll be very sorry for. There are plenty at Fort Victoria who know and can identify me."

"I'll take my chance of that!" retorted Glanfield with a sneer.

"Hold out your right wrist," said one of the troopers to Tom.

Tom went scarlet. His fists clenched. He was on the point of knocking the man down.

"Take it easy, lad," came Saxon's voice, quiet and composed as ever. "It's only for a few hours."

The shining steel circlet snapped on Tom's wrist, and, chained to one of the troopers, he was marched along the path out of the swamp.

Saxon was just behind him. Tom heard him whisper, "Don't worry, lad. It's not much out of our way. We've got to cross Cradle Mountain, anyhow"

"Silence there!" ordered Glanfield brutally. There was the least, almost imperceptible flash in Saxon's eye. Some day there would be a reckoning with this Jack-in-office.

A dozen horses were picketed among the trees. Tom was ordered to mount one. His feet were tied beneath the saddle

girths, and in a few minutes Glanfield gave the order to march.

Just at that moment Tom felt that he hated Glanfield every bit as badly as he hated Stark.

The party rode two and two, a trooper beside each prisoner. Tom was relieved when he found young Ryder was his companion.

There was no track through the woods, but the horses seemed to know their way. After an hour's ride they came out of the thick fir forest and began to breast a steepish hill. It was covered with scattered trees, and the snow, though thawing, was a good deal deeper than below.

It was a nasty day, dull, damp, depressing, with thick clouds and a cold wind; very different from the bright sun of the day before. Tom's feet were half frozen. "Wonder how on earth he manages to take it so coolly," he thought, glancing at Saxon.

No one spoke. The silence, broken only by the squelching of the horses' feet in the wet snow and the mournful sigh of the wind in the tree-tops, got on Tom's nerves.

"Have we much higher to go?" he whispered at last to Ryder.

Ryder grinned. "Bless you, we're hardly started yet!" he replied in a low tone. A moment later he went on, "I say, is it straight goods what you told us?"

"Of course," replied Tom indignantly.

"All right. Don't get shirty. I thought it was. What a beastly sell for old Glanfield!"

"What do you have a fellow like that for?" asked Tom indignantly. "They always told me the Mounted Police were the finest force in the Service. I've been hearing that ever since I got to Canada."

Ryder coloured. "My good chap, you don't dislike him any worse than we do. Pig-headed, obstinate brute! There's not another like him in the corps."

"Glad of that, anyhow," said Tom. "All the same, it

don't comfort us for being lugged all the way to Fort Victoria."

"The Colonel'll jolly soon put you right when you get there!" replied Ryder consolingly.

Tom was on the verge of saying that wouldn't help them. But he remembered Saxon's warning as to talking, and checked himself.

Mile after mile they moved upwards into a great white wilderness. Tom had never even imagined mountains on a scale like this. The trail wound endlessly along huge, smooth, snow-covered slopes. So vast that men and horses looked like ants slowly crawling on the steep roof of a house.

The snow was soft and sticky. Even up here it was thawing hard. A small stream which they forded was roaring girth-high with clear green snow-water, bitter cold. Tom got his feet soaked, and, to make matters worse, it began to rain; a thick, driving grey mist.

When the midday halt came Tom was so thoroughly chilled that he could not stand when his feet were untied.

Saxon appealed to the sergeant. "Let the boy walk about a bit, and get his blood moving. He's not accustomed to this climate, and it's enough to kill him."

"I don't want any of your sauce!" retorted Glanfield.

"Sauce! I'm talking common sense. The boy's fresh from England. It's simply brutal to treat him in this way."

For a moment Glanfield looked as if he would refuse. Perhaps it was the faces of his men made him change his mind. With very bad grace he ordered Ryder to handcuff Tom and walk him up and down sharply for five minutes.

No fire was lit. Cold provisions, bully beef and biscuit, were served out. For drink there was water. But presently Tom felt something quietly pushed into his hand.

"Have a drink?" muttered Ryder. "It's rum and milk. It'll do you good. Don't let Glanfield see."

Tom gratefully accepted. He felt much better when the order to march was given again.

"I'll tie you with a bit of slack," whispered Ryder. "That'll give you a chance to move your feet."

As he spoke there was a dull roar in the distance. It was low and deep like thunder. It lasted several seconds and the echoes boomed among the mountains.

"What's that?" exclaimed Tom.

"Snow slide," answered Ryder shortly.

Tom noticed the troopers looking round uneasily. The eldest, a tall Irishman named Kelly, spoke to Glanfield. "We'd better be hurrying, sergeant."

Glanfield snubbed him.

"Silly ass!" muttered Saxon vexedly. "The snow peels off these slopes like rind off a rotten lemon. That pig-headed fool will get us into trouble if he's not careful."

A mile or so further on they came to much steeper ground. They were obliged to ride single file. Presently the trail was a mere ledge along the side of a precipice. There was no made road. Here and there a rock which barred the way had been blasted, but that was all.

It made Tom's head reel to look over the unprotected side of the track down into the canyon below, where, hidden by the rain mist, a torrent roared noisily.

Ryder saw that the boy was pulling his horse in close to the right-hand precipice. "Don't you worry!" he said kindly. "Give your beast his head. He'll look after himself."

They had reached a place where the rock to the right was absolutely perpendicular when Tom heard that roar again. A most peculiar noise. It was just like the sliding crunch which snow makes when it slips off a slate roof. Only this was a thousand times louder.

"I say, that's close!" cried Tom, turning to Ryder.

"Beastly close!" replied Ryder, whose horse was showing signs of panic.

"Get as close as you can to the rock!" shouted Saxon to Tom. Not only Tom but everyone took his advice.

The roar increased. It became deafening. Tom, looking up, saw a huge grey mass of loose rock and half-melted snow leap into sight over the brow of the precipice.

It was an avalanche, and they were right under it.

"That sees our finish!" he heard young Ryder mutter. Then came a deafening crash and such a blast of wind that Tom, horse and all, was jammed tight as if glued against the rock wall.

For the next few seconds it was Niagara let loose. The whole mountain seemed to be melting. The solid rock quivered under the terrific fall.

Then it was over, and Tom's only impression was utter amazement that he and his companions were still on the path. Not one of them was missing.

"One pack horse gone. That's the extent of the damage," remarked Ryder coolly.

"But, but——" muttered Tom.

"It went slap over us. The cliff overhangs a bit above us. Narrow squeak all the same. Look down there!"

Tom looked. The sides of the gorge below were pared as if a giant plane had gone over them. Trees, turf, earth, all had disappeared. Acres were bare to the bed rock. Hundreds of feet below, a monstrous dome of tight-packed snow dammed the ravine. Part of the fall had struck the path a little way behind them, and cut a section out of it as neatly as if it had been done with a giant cheese-scoop.

"Teach old Glanfield to stir his stumps," continued Ryder. "We shan't escape so easily a second time."

Glanfield's voice was rather shaky as he gave the order to march on, and Tom noticed that he pushed his horse as fast as the beast could walk.

It had cleared up and the sun was breaking through the rack of grey fog. The air was warmer, and the streams of water from the fast-melting snow above splashed on the path and ricocheted into the gulf below. Every few minutes

the dull roar of some distant avalanche woke the mountain echoes.

The path began to descend. "Not much further now," said Ryder cheerily.

"I shall be jolly glad!" replied Tom. "With one's feet tied like this, one doesn't stand a ghost of a show if anything happens."

The trail swung to the left round a great spur of the mountain. As the sergeant rounded the corner Tom heard a sharp exclamation of dismay.

Kelly, who was next the sergeant, turned in his saddle and shouted to the rest. "Faith, lads, we're in the dickens an' all of a mess! The trail's cut by a snow slide."

The others crowded up. Kelly was right. More than twenty feet of the path was clean gone, leaving a gap that a mountain goat would have shied at.

Ryder looked at the break in blank dismay. "And we can't go back either!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XI

TREED BY A GRIZZLY

"Look at the sergeant!" chuckled Ryder softly. "Fussing about like a lost puppy-dog."

"We'll have to go back," Glanfield was saying to Kelly.

"Can't do that, sergeant. Sure, the path's cut behind us."

"What are we to do, then?"

"Faith, that's for you to say, sergeant," replied Kelly woodenly. But Tom caught a twinkle in the man's grey eyes.

Saxon had been looking over the edge of the cliff. He broke in suddenly. "Sergeant Glanfield, it's possible to climb down the rocks below and get on to that ledge where the trees grow. From there one can reach the trail again, and fix some logs across the gap. Take these infernal ropes off my feet, and I'll try it."

"Ha, and never come back again!" retorted Glanfield. "You're smart, Mr. Strong-hand Saxon, but not quite smart enough to get round me."

Saxon shrugged his broad shoulders. "What's the good of wasting breath on a fool?" he remarked audibly.

"Glanfield heard!" chuckled Ryder in Tom's ear. "Look at his face!"

The sergeant's face was the colour of brick, but he evidently thought best to pretend he had not heard. He went on talking to Kelly.

"You might try to climb down here," he suggested, pointing to the very spot which Saxon had been looking at.

"Sure I'm no good at climbing, sergeant," replied Kelly unhappily. "I'd only break me neck. Still, if ye say so, sergeant, 'tis me duty to obey ye." And with a resigned air he began pulling off his coat.

"Oh, if you're all afraid I'll go myself!" cried Glanfield angrily.

"He thinks someone else'll volunteer for the job," whispered Ryder. "But they jolly well won't. Now we'll see some sport!"—as Glanfield went stiffly over the edge.

"It's not such bad climbing," went on Ryder, "if you've got the head to stand the height."

Tom glanced over. Ryder was right. There was plenty of hand-hold. But the enormous depth made the boy's unaccustomed head reel. It was quite five hundred feet to the glimpses of foam-flecked water between the toy-like firs which stood out stiffly along the great rock face.

Glanfield looked like a fly on a wall. He was a strong man, but stiff and wooden.

Ryder watched him with contempt. "At this rate he'll be all day getting down to the ledge," he observed.

A clump of scrubby firs grew on the ledge which Saxon had pointed out. Their trunks rose from a confused tumble of rocks.

Glanfield having at last reached the ledge, disappeared from sight among these trees.

"Hulloa, what's up?" cried Tom, as a curious sound came from among the boulders. It was a deep whoop.

Instantly it was followed by a howl of terror, and the watchers on the trail saw Glanfield running for dear life along the ledge closely pursued by a quarter of a ton of extremely angry bear.

"Great Scott! it's a grizzly!" shouted Ryder. He and Kelly and another of the troopers promptly unslung their carbines.

"Don't shoot!" came Saxon's order, sharp and insistent. "You'll kill the sergeant."

It was curious to see the troopers instinctively obey the voice of command.

"Look, he's climbing a tree!" cried Ryder. "Great Scott, I never thought Glanfield had it in him to move that quick!"

Saxon's voice again. "Kelly, untie me. Give me a gun. I've got to get him out of that."

Kelly hesitated an instant. "Sure, I'll untie ye," he said. "But I daren't give ye a gun, ye being a prisoner."

"Then a rope, a knife, anything! Don't stand staring like a pack of schoolgirls. The brute'll have the man in two twos."

The bear had reared himself on his hind legs against the tree. He stood full eight feet high. Gaunt and ragged after his long winter fast, he was a most fearsome apparition. He was growling horribly, and apparently trying to hoist himself into the tree.

But the tree was a small one, and it already held a large man. A bear is a sagacious beast, and this one was evidently pondering whether the tree would stand the double weight. A supper even of live man is no use to a bear who has fallen over a cliff to get it.

Kelly slashed the rope. Saxon was off his horse in a moment. Ryder flung him a coiled lariat, Kelly gave him a knife. He threw the lariat over his shoulder, and was over the cliff in a twinkling.

Tom breathlessly watched him spring from rock to rock.

"Great Scott, but he can climb!" Ryder exclaimed in admiration. "He's like a goat. Wonderful for such a square-built man. If I hadn't sized you chaps up from the first, Holt, I'd believe you now. That's Saxon the Scout, and no blooming error!"

Tom glowed with pride.

"I say, look at the bear!" went on the irrepressible Ryder. "If it goes up the tree, it's a poor look-out for Glanfield."

Bruin had evidently made up his mind that if he wanted his

first meal of the year he had to climb for it. Driving his great chisel-like claws into the bark, he began to hoist himself ponderously up the trunk.

The grizzly is not a good climber in spite of his tremendous strength, and he went up very slowly. His vast weight made the small fir vibrate wildly. Glanfield uttered a yell of horror and scrambled frantically up as high as he could go.

He clung there desperately and roared for help. Tom didn't want to see the man killed, but he felt a certain grim satisfaction at the plight of his enemy.

Saxon came leaping lightly along the rocks. He was not on the ledge from which the tree grew, but twenty or thirty feet above it. He stopped exactly opposite the tree.

Glanfield caught sight of him. "Shoot!" he howled. "Shoot the brute!"

"Can't. Your chaps won't trust me with a gun," answered Saxon drily.

"Stop him somehow. He'll have me in a minute!" roared back Glanfield. He was clinging like a large ape in the topmost fork and gazing down at the bear with eyes almost popping out of his head from fright. Glanfield was not a coward, but any man may be pardoned for being scared when treed by a big grizzly.

"Hang on tight!" cried Saxon reassuringly. "I'll see to the bear."

Saxon picked up a stone and flung it at the bear. Bruin paid no attention. He had got as high as he dared, and was reaching out a colossal foreleg trying to rake the sergeant from his perch. The wretched little fir tree swung like a sapling in a gale.

"I'll make you feel, you brute!" cried Saxon, and selecting a large, sharp-edged chunk of rock, he lifted it, poised it, and hurled it with all his great strength at the bear. It hit him just at the back of the neck, a blow that would have killed a man.

The bear turned with an angry growl. He seemed to be

thinking. Should he turn back and tackle this impudent human? Yes, he would. He began to come down slowly backwards.

This was Saxon's chance. With a lightning movement he unslung the lariat, and the rope whirled out round his head in widening circles. Next instant out it flew, hissing through the air, and the loop settled neatly round master grizzly's neck.

With a tremendous roar of rage the bear stopped his downward progress, and made a furious effort to tear the offending noose from his neck.

Too late! Saxon had jerked it tight and the bear's teeth and claws were useless. If the beast had had sense enough to drop off the tree at once and turn on Saxon he might have won the game. Instead, he clutched the tree-trunk all the more tightly and hung on like grim death.

It was pull devil, pull baker. Saxon braced his feet against the rock and exerted all his great strength. The bear began to choke. His growls turned to smothered wheezes. But he still hung on like a limpet.

"My word, I wish we were on that rope!" muttered Ryder breathlessly. It was too much for him. He jumped off his horse and began to scramble down.

"He's coming!" cried Tom. "Saxon's pulling him off."

Down came the bear. Down, with a tremendous thump, flat on his back on the ledge.

But the shock jerked Glanfield from his insecure perch. There was a gasp from the spectators on the trail as the sergeant came flying out of the tree, and fell—flop on top of the bear.

Lucky for him that the bear was half choked and more than half stunned! Glanfield didn't wait to make any inquiries for Bruin's health. Up he shot like a bouncing rubber ball, and went streaking it along the ledge for all he was worth.

Ten yards further was a crevasse filled to the brim with slushy snow. In his blind haste Glanfield never saw it. In he

went slap up to his armpits and stuck there tight as a nail in a board.

"Help ! Help !" he kept on shouting, while his arms went like windmills.

Meantime Saxon had made fast the rope and came springing down to the bear. His knife flashed in the sunlight.

"He can't kill it with that !" gasped Tom.

Almost before the words were out of his mouth Saxon had rushed in, and avoiding in some amazing way the whirling paws, each tipped with claws heavy and sharp as chilled steel, had driven his knife to the hilt in the great shaggy body.

With a grunt the great brute straightened out. A convulsive shudder, and it was dead.

"Faith, 'tis the fust time I iver seed a bear killed with naught but a rope an' a knife !" exclaimed Kelly in wonderment.

"Meantime Ryder had reached the lower ledge.

"Splendid, Mr. Saxon !" he cried. "Never saw anything finer in my life."

Saxon smiled. "If you will kindly extricate your sergeant, Mr. Ryder, I should be glad of his permission to skin the bear," he said politely.

Ryder's eyes twinkled. But another of the troopers had to come down and help before they could pull Glanfield out of the trap he had fallen into.

CHAPTER XII

HOT ON THE TRAIL

"THERE's the Fort," said Ryder to Tom, and he pointed out across the plain. "We shall just make it by dark."

After Sergeant Glanfield had made a mess of it, Saxon had shown the troopers how to bridge the gap in the pass with tree trunks cut from the ledge where the bear was killed and hauled up by ropes, and they had managed to get their horses across without losing one of them.

But the accident had delayed them nearly two hours, and the sun was setting before they reached the western slopes of Cradle Mountain.

Now they were dropping down the last spur, and three or four hundred feet below stretched a vast open plain nearly bare of snow. In the far distance, outlined against the crimson and gold of the evening sky, Tom could see the roofs and chimneys of Fort Victoria.

"They call it a fort," went on Ryder, "and it was one in the old days when Crees and Blackfeet used to be on the war-path every spring. But there's not much fort about it now. The old blockhouse is still there, but in these days it's only barracks and a trading-station."

"Don't the Indians ever give trouble nowadays?" asked Tom with interest.

Ryder laughed. "Not when any of our chaps are around. They know better. But a redskin's a redskin always, and I won't say they don't go in for all kinds of private devilments in their own villages. I rather hold with what the Yankees say, 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian.'"

Tom laughed. He and this cheery young trooper were becoming quite good friends.

"See that trail crossing ours at right angles?" continued Ryder. "That's the South Saskatchewan trail. Lots of fur traders go up that way in the autumn and come back in the spring."

"There's someone coming along it now," remarked Tom. "See! There are three of 'em riding."

"You've got jolly good eyes!" exclaimed Ryder. "I can see some men, but I'm blessed if I could count them!"

At that moment the party halted abruptly. A trooper's horse had cast a shoe. As the trail was too narrow for two horses to pass they all came to a standstill.

"I'm going to have a squint at those folk," said Ryder, unslinging his field-glasses, and putting them to his eyes.

"I say, that's precious odd, Holt! Those chaps are going west. Rum time of year for a party to be riding west. And they're travelling light, too!"

"Suppose they've got some business, or perhaps they're tourists," replied Tom carelessly.

Ryder laughed. "Tourists! That's a breed we don't see in these parts. If you'd lived here as long as I have you'd realise how queer it was to see people riding west at this season of the year and at this time o' the evening."

He took another look through his glasses. "They're hurrying," he said. "But their horses are awfully fagged. Here, you've got better eyes than I. Take the glasses and tell us what you think of 'em."

Tom took the glasses and focussed them carefully on the distant party, who seemed to crawl like dots across the vast plain below.

Next moment he gave a sharp gasp, and went so white that Ryder, thinking he was fainting, flung out a hasty arm.

But Tom Holt pulled himself together instantly.

"Saxon!" he shouted hoarsely. "See that party on the plain?"

"Dess noise there among the prisoners!" ordered Glanfield angrily from the head of the column.

"Aye, lad!" replied Saxon, without taking the slightest notice of the sergeant. "I see them."

"One is father!" cried Tom, his voice hoarse with excitement.

"Lend me a pair of glasses someone," cried Saxon sharply.

"Here," said Ryder, and passed his along.

"Didn't I order silence?" roared Glanfield.

No one paid the least attention to him. Troopers as well as prisoners were infected by the intense excitement of Tom and Saxon. Glanfield raged and stormed, but the path was too narrow for him to get back, and he was quite helpless.

"You're right, Tom," came Saxon's ringing voice. "It's your father; and one of the others is Lomax."

"Your father!" exclaimed Ryder.

Tom paid no attention. His eyes were fixed longingly on the distant group of horsemen.

"Sergeant," cried Saxon. His voice was so compelling that Glanfield turned in his saddle.

"What's up now?" he cried peevishly.

"You see that party riding West on the Saskatchewan trail?"

"Yes," sulkily.

"One of those is the father of Tom Holt here. He and I have come five thousand miles to find him, and there he is in plain sight."

"What's all this cock-and-bull yarn to do with me?" returned Glanfield harshly.

Saxon's face darkened. But he controlled himself.

"This," he answered quietly. "The boy's father is in the hands of Stark's gang. You know what that means?"

"I believe you're one of Stark's fellows yourself," retorted Glanfield.

Dubois, who was next Saxon, saw his hands clench till

the nails sank into the flesh. But the big frontiersman's voice was steady as ever as he spoke again.

"Sergeant, if that party isn't stopped, it's likely the boy may never again see his father alive. I give you my word two of those men are criminals, and I ask you in common humanity to let us follow them. I'll give you my parole that, if you do so, I will be at the Fort within twenty-four hours."

Glanfield laughed. It was the sort of harsh cackle that irritates past endurance. "Oh! another of your little schemes for clearing out, my friend. Getting scared, eh, now you're in sight of the Fort?"

Saxon took no notice of the insult. He tried once again.

"If you won't let me go, send a couple of your men. I tell you the two who are carrying off Tom Holt's father are criminals. Their arrest will do you credit. You can't refuse."

"Can't I? I do. I'm just about sick of your jaw. Kelly, if that horse's shoe is right, mount. Time we were at the Fort."

A sort of groan rose from the troopers. Apart from the sympathy which they felt for Tom, they were all as keen as mustard to try conclusions with two of Stark's desperadoes.

Ryder was simply furious. "It's a blessed shame!" he muttered fiercely.

"I veesh I vas next zat Glanfield!" exclaimed Dubois.

"I would knock heem ovaire ze cliff."

Tom said nothing. He was white as a sheet under his tan, and his eyes fairly blazed. Ryder glanced at him in amazement. "Phew, I wouldn't be Glanfield for a bit," he muttered to himself. "That chap looks plumb dangerous."

There was no more to be said or done. The little party wound slowly down the pass, Glanfield riding in sulky dignity at their head. Tom's eyes never moved from the three horsemen on the plain.

On and on the three passed westwards, slowly but yet without any pause. Smaller they grew and smaller, till they

dwindled to mere specks imperceptible to any eye less keen than Tom's.

The sun had dropped below the horizon, the light was failing ; at last they passed away into the soft grey mist of evening, and were utterly lost to view.

Then at last Tom looked away, and young Ryder, who was watching with sympathy, saw the boy pass his coat sleeve across his swimming eyes.

But Tom Holt was not the sort to give up in despair. He pulled himself together at once. "At any rate, dad's alive and well," he said to himself. "That's one comfort."

They reached the bottom of the defile, and as soon as they were out on the open prairie Glanfield gave the order to trot.

Saxon managed to drop back next to Tom. "Don't worry too much, lad," he said very kindly. "Kelly thinks Colonel Westcott is at the Fort. The colonel knows me. If he is there we shall be on the trail again at moonrise."

"But shall we catch them?" muttered Tom.

"Of course we'll catch them. Never doubt that, Tom."

It was nearly dark when they rode in through the gate of the Fort. They were at once challenged by a sentry.

"Prisoners, sergeant?" inquired the sentry, as Glanfield answered his challenge.

"Aye, that moonshining gang from Wind River. Got 'em last night." Glanfield's tone was triumphant. "Call an escort. You, Kelly and Ryder, take the horses."

Four men came marching up. "Handcuff these men," ordered Glanfield, pointing to the prisoners, "and march them to the orderly room."

"He won't be quite so chirpy in another five minutes," observed Saxon quietly to Tom.

Tom hardly listened. He was boiling with indignation at being marched across the barrack square in handcuffs.

However, he followed Saxon's example and made no attempt to resist the indignity.

Presently they were standing, wet, cold, and weary, in a large bare room. A long table was across one end, an unlighted stove at the other. The atmosphere was arctic, and Tom's teeth chattered.

A door at the far end of the room opened and in walked a tall man with a bronzed face and a heavy fair moustache. He was in mess kit, the splendid scarlet and gold of his regiment. Tom thought he had never set eyes on a handsomer figure.

"Hear you've caught the moonshiners, sergeant," were his first words.

"Yes, sir. The Wind River Gang," replied the sergeant, saluting.

"Not the gang, Colonel Westcott, only one of them," said Saxon, quietly stepping forward.

The colonel fairly jumped.

"Great Scott! W-w-what—you, Saxon!" he stammered, then stopped, dumb with sheer amazement.

"It's me, right enough, colonel," replied Saxon coolly. "Your sergeant insisted on arresting my friends and myself as moonshiners. Do what we would we could not persuade him that we were not the Wind River Gang. He flatly refused to believe us."

Tom stole a glance at Glanfield. The man's jaw had dropped. His prominent eyes were bulging. He looked like a newly landed fish. Tom felt no pity. He was as good-natured a fellow as lived, but Glanfield's behaviour during the past day had left the boy fairly burning.

The colonel turned sternly on Glanfield.

"D'ye mean to say, sergeant, you never heard of Strong-hand Saxon?"

"No, sir."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself," snapped the colonel. "Take those handcuffs off at once."

Glanfield hurried to obey. He looked utterly crestfallen.

"I thought everyone in the North-West knew you, my

dear Saxon," went on the colonel, as he came striding round the table. "Introduce me to your friends."

Saxon did so, bringing Tom and Dubois forward.

"And who's this?" asked the colonel, pointing to Pratt, who was scowling in the background.

"That's the only real moonshiner of the lot," replied Saxon. "But he's our prisoner, not your sergeant's."

Dubois broke in excitedly.

"Ze sergeant, he did take zat man's word against all of ours! It vas not right. He could see zat ze fellow was one great scoundrel."

Colonel Westcott looked puzzled. "Explain, please, Saxon."

Saxon did so. It only took a minute or two, but he gave the whole story, leaving out only how he had saved Glanfield's life from the grizzly.

The colonel's face darkened. When Saxon had finished, he turned upon Glanfield, who by this time was shaking in his shoes. His strong voice rang with indignation.

"So you took the word of an object like that"—pointing to Pratt—"against that of all the three others. Where were your eyes, you idiot? 'Pon my soul, I'm ashamed to have such a fool in the force. I've a good mind to put you under arrest. Get to your quarters. I'll consider your case later."

Glanfield was utterly cowed. He crept away without a word. He looked so utterly humiliated that Tom could almost have found it in his heart to be sorry for him.

"You must be half starved, you poor fellows," continued the colonel. "Come to my rooms. I can fit you out with a change of some kind, and then you must have some dinner."

"I'm immensely indebted to you, colonel, but we must be away within an hour."

"What, after crossing Cradle Mountain?" The colonel stared in amazement.

"It's the boy's father we are after," said Saxon.

"Surely you can wait till to-morrow?"

"No, we actually saw Mr. Holt little more than an hour ago on the Saskatchewan trail. It's this way, colonel. Mr. Holt has been kidnapped by Stark's gang."

The colonel's eyes opened wide. "Kidnapped! Here in the country I police?"

"No, in England. Wait, I'll tell you." And very rapidly Saxon told of Stark's nefarious plan to force Mr. Holt to sell him the lands of his dead brother at Sunk River.

"You see," he finished, "the trouble is that Mr. Holt knows nothing of Stark's plans. He believes that the two scoundrels who have him in charge are agents not of Stark, but of his dead brother. He has never heard of me, and has no idea that his son is on his heels."

"But this is atrocious!" cried the colonel. "I know Stark's reputation, but I had no idea he was capable of this. One thing strikes me. The sale, you say, cannot be completed without young Holt's signature. What good, then, is his father alone to Stark?"

"Ha, you don't know Stark, colonel. One of two things will happen. Either he will hold the father to ransom, the price of his freedom being his son's signature. Or else——" Saxon paused and looked significantly at Tom.

"Or else," broke in Tom, "he'll put me out of the way. I quite understand. He's tried it already, besides making an attempt on Saxon's life."

The colonel gave a low whistle. "Saxon, it may be a blessing in disguise that that fool Glanfield brought you here. I've long known that Stark was a danger to the whole community. He's at the bottom of half the trouble in the North-West. But he's so infernally cunning that so far he's kept out of our clutches. This gives us a *casus belli*, in other words, a real pretext for arresting him."

"You'll help us, sir?" cried Tom, his eyes flashing.

"Indeed I will, my boy. To the best of my ability. Saxon, you shall start as soon as you like. I'll give you horses and a couple of my troopers. With any luck, you ought to run

into those fellows who have Mr. Holt in charge within the next twelve hours."

"It was a blessing we were brought here, sir," exclaimed Tom impulsively. "I'll forgive Glanfield for arresting us."

The colonel laid a kindly hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You must have some food first, Holt," he said. "And we can fix you all three up with clean shirts from our stores. Come along. You'll feel twice the man after a wash and a change."

Tom Holt had hardly realised how tired and sore he was until he found himself in a big tub of warm water in the colonel's bedroom. And certainly he had never before fully realised the intense luxury of clean underclothing and socks. He had been wet to the skin twice since they lost their baggage on Wind River.

The colonel seemed as if he could not do enough to make up for the stupid mistakes of his sergeant, and Saxon and Tom fitted themselves out afresh from head to foot. They even got new boots out of the stores.

Then came supper. Such a delicious meal. Well cooked and well served.

The colonel kept on filling up their plates. "You've got a long night before you," he said, "so eat well. But mind, I shall expect you here to dinner to-morrow."

"I hope and expect we shall be here, colonel," said Saxon, with a smile, and he stood up.

"I feel my own man again," he went on. "Now we mustn't wait any longer."

"Ryder and Kelly are waiting with the horses. They'll go with you. Now, mind you bring Holt's father back. And if they do by any chance give you the slip be careful of one thing. Don't let them get over into the States. There's no law and order there except what you pay for. Here it's free! What there is of it."

CHAPTER XIII

THE GREAT BOILING

"FRESH horses, and they with not more than three hours' start. We ought to run 'em to ground by midnight." Ryder's voice rang cheerfully, as the little party of five trotted steadily across the prairie.

The young trooper was keen as mustard since he had heard Tom Holt's story. He was vastly looking forward to the meeting between father and son.

"Sure, we'll see their camp fire in an hour!" exclaimed big Kelly, who was almost equally interested.

Tom's spirits rose. It was delightful to be among these kindly fellows, and he was so eager to get on that, in spite of the darkness, he was longing to put his beast to a gallop.

Only Saxon said nothing. Tom wondered why. Ragged clouds were blowing across the face of the new-risen moon. As one passed the boy caught a glimpse of his friend's face in the pale silver light. Its expression startled him, it was so set and stern.

"What's up, Saxon?" he asked, in a low voice. "Don't you think we shall find 'em soon?"

Saxon started. He had been deep in thought. "I hope so, Tom," he said kindly.

"Hope," exclaimed Tom. "Aren't you sure?"

Saxon turned in his saddle. "It all depends on whether they know we are after 'em or not."

"How can they know?"

"If they had glasses, Tom, they could have seen us on the mountain as plainly as we saw them."

"I never thought of that," replied Tom, crestfallen. "And if they did?"

"They won't camp till after midnight, and then not on the trail. Nor will they light a fire."

"Poor dad!" exclaimed Tom. "How beastly for him!" Then his face cleared. "But you can track them," he exclaimed confidently.

"Yes, I can track them—so long as——" he stopped.

"What were you going to say?" asked Tom anxiously.

"So long as the weather holds up," said Saxon slowly, and gazed searchingly at the sky. "The trouble is, Tom, there's a big rain brewing."

"Zat is so," put in Dubois, who had caught the last few words. "Zere will be mooch rain before ze morning."

"And that'll hide the tracks?" asked Tom anxiously.

"It will," said Saxon. "And the moon too. One can't do much in pitch dark and a rainstorm."

As he spoke, Saxon spurred his horse. Tom understood. The scout wanted to use the remaining moonlight to discover where the tracks left the main trail.

Saxon was right. The cloud wrack rose rapidly out of the western mountains, and, borne by a strong wind, covered the whole sky.

Minute by minute it turned darker, until Tom could barely see the well-beaten trail which they were following.

Presently a squall swept down, and cold rain lashed their faces. Yet Saxon never checked his horse, but kept on at a steady lope, that curiously easy rocking canter to which all Western horses are trained.

Tom wondered how Saxon could possibly tell whether or where the track of the fugitives left the trail.

They were now half a dozen miles from the fort and skirting the base of Cradle Mountain. Dim in the darkness, its huge, forest-clad bulk loomed to the right.

Another mile, the squall had passed, but the whole sky was thick with clouds. The moon was hidden, and not a star was visible.

Suddenly Saxon reined in sharply.

"Here we are," he cried, springing from his horse and throwing the bridle to Tom.

He went down on hands and knees, and closely examined the ground.

"Aye, all three of 'em left the trail here, and turned to the right. Kelly, you know this country better than I. Any idea where they've gone?"

"Sorra a notion, sorr!" replied Kelly. "I'm thinking they tuk to th' woods to get shelter."

"Yes, that'll be it. So that they needn't light a fire. Tom, it's a pity, but they know we're after them."

Tom groaned in disappointment. He had so counted on finishing up the business without further delay.

"We'll get on as far as we can," said Saxon, and swung himself back into the saddle.

Now Tom got his real first lesson in tracking. For that matter he could see nothing at all. But Saxon seemed to have eyes like a cat's. He jogged on not quite so fast as before, but still at a fox-trot, and the others followed in a string.

"How on earth does he do it?" exclaimed Tom at last, fairly lost in amazement.

"Sure ye'll see when ye've been as long in the counthry as Mither Saxon," replied Kelly.

The trail swung in close to the base of Cradle Mountain. And now the rain began in real earnest. It fell in streams, and the night grew dark as pitch.

Soon the soft prairie, already broken by the winter frost, became a swamp. The horses began to stumble badly. Another mile of struggle in the face of the pitiless storm, and Tom's horse came down, pitching the boy over its head.

"That's enough," said Saxon, as he helped Tom up.

"We must wait till dawn. There's a bluff over there that'll give us some shelter."

They walked their horses to the bluff, picketed them close under the rock, put on the nosebags, and strapped their loin cloths tight. To Tom, accustomed to English ways, it seemed a cruel thing to leave horses exposed to such weather and standing fetlock-deep in mire. But Saxon assured him the hardy beasts would take no harm.

"Good thing the colonel gave us these mackintoshes," observed Tom as he seated himself next to Saxon on a comparatively dry spot under the lee of the bluff.

"Slickers, you mean," smiled Saxon. "Yes, they're splendid things. An English mackintosh would be utterly useless here, but these yellow oilskins'll stand anything. Nothing like 'em! They're warm and dry, both. They only cost two and a half dollars, and with one of them, a proper Stetson hat and shaps (chaparejos, called shaps, leather leg guards used by cowboys), a man can keep dry in the wettest rain that ever fell."

It was no use trying to sleep. They were too cold. Tom got a cat nap or two, but he was intensely grateful when a streak of pale grey showed in the east.

Dawn brought no slackening in the pitiless downpour, and the party ate a cold breakfast and stiffly mounted their soaking steeds.

The pale light showed the prairie a muddy morass. Every depression was a pool. The sky was grey, and, driven by a strong west wind, the rain beat in their faces.

"We shall never be able to follow the trail," groaned Tom.

"It isn't the trail that's worrying me so much," replied Saxon gravely.

"What then?"

"The rain, lad."

He turned to Kelly.

"There's a creek on beyond, isn't there?"

"'Deed an' there is," replied the Irishman. "The Pronghorn. And I'm thinking 'twill be a job to cross it."

Saxon made no reply; but Tom, who was watching him keenly, saw that his face was graver than ever.

They rode on. Saxon was following something, though, strain his eyes as he might, the muddy ground told Tom no story. Every day that passed gave him fresh respect for the wonderful powers of Strong-hand.

The grassland gave way to scrubby bushes, and a dark line of forest showed dimly through the mist. A distant roaring came to their ears. Tom knew it for the voice of a swollen river.

Presently they topped a rise, and below, in a shallow valley, roared the Pronghorn.

"Phew, but it's coming down a banker!" exclaimed young Ryder.

Tom gave an exclamation of despair.

"How on earth are we going to cross that?" he cried.

"Is that the ford, Kelly?" asked Saxon, pulling up his horse on the edge of the rushing torrent.

Kelly shrugged his shoulders. "*It was*, sorr."

Saxon got off, and examined the ground carefully at the water's edge. "Yes, that's why they hurried, Tom. They crossed here last night before the river came down."

"We must follow them," cried Tom desperately, and was actually forcing his horse into the yellow foam when Saxon stopped him.

"Don't be foolish, lad," he said sternly. "No horse could live in that. Kelly, how far must we ride to find a ford?"

Kelly shook his head. "Sure, there isn't another, sorr, an' what's more, the wather's rising fast."

Tom felt perfectly frantic. To have come so far, and be baffled by a rainstorm! He could see that the creek was hardly waist deep at ordinary times.

"Can't we make a raft?" he cried.

"Sure, the trees are all the other side," replied Kelly, looking at the boy with sympathy.

Ryder cut in. "I say, Kelly, isn't old Winyatt's shack somewhere down the creek? He might have a boat of sorts."

"Faith, I believe you're right," exclaimed Kelly.

Tom's hope revived. "How far?" he cried.

"Five or six miles," replied Ryder. "But don't count on it. He may not have a boat."

"We'll see, at any rate," said Saxon decisively, and they turned their horses down the bank.

They had not ridden half a mile when Tom, who was leading, pulled up suddenly.

"What's that," he cried. His sharp eye had caught some dark object in a clump of willows by the bank.

Kelly answered: "Faith, if the age of miracles wasn't past I'd say it was a canoe turned bottom up."

"Exactly what it is," said Saxon quietly.

With beating heart Tom galloped up. In the shelter of the willows a birch-bark canoe lay bottom up across two big stones. Underneath sat an elderly Indian wrapped in a filthy red blanket, smoking philosophically.

Tom gave a gasp of surprise. The Indian glanced up. "How?" he grunted, and went on smoking.

"Ask him for his canoe," begged Tom excitedly, as Saxon rode up.

Saxon said something in the Cree language. The Indian merely shook his head.

Saxon took a silver dollar from his pocket, and held it up. The red man's eyes gleamed, but again he shook his head.

Another dollar and another. Still the same result.

Saxon spoke again. This time the Indian condescended to reply.

"He vows he won't lend us his canoe because it will probably be swamped or smashed. He will sell it or trade it for a horse."

"Can't we buy it?" implored Tom.

"Afraid we'll have to," replied Saxon.

More talk. The Indian evidently had a keen eye to the main chance. At last the canoe changed hands at eighteen dollars.

"About twice what it's worth. It's old and leaky," grumbled Saxon.

The Indian took his money, rose, wrapped the blanket round him a little more tightly, and, stalking impassively away, was lost in the mist of driving rain.

After a consultation Saxon and Kelly agreed that it would be impossible to swim horses across the creek in such a flood. Eventually it was arranged that Ryder and Kelly should take all the five horses back to the Fort, while Saxon, Tom, and Dubois should cross the creek and follow the fugitives on foot.

"'Tis a poor game runnin' afther mounted men without horses," objected Kelly.

"But they won't be expecting us," returned Saxon with a grim smile. "Now, Tom, help me put the canoe in the water. I'll take you over first, and then come back for Dubois."

Tom had never before in his life been in a canoe, and only once or twice in a boat. This arrangement of birch bark looked absurdly frail to brave the roaring yellow flood which swept so fiercely down the valley. The water was rising minute by minute, and already the bushes, six feet above ordinary high-water mark, were lashing their bare branches in the fierce current.

"All you've got to do is to sit still, and keep on sitting still," warned Saxon, as he held the canoe firmly in a little backwater.

Tom set his teeth, stepped gingerly into the cranky little craft, and sat down in the bow with his face to the stern. Next moment Saxon was kneeling in the stern, and with a vigorous stroke of the paddle, sent the canoe flying out from the bank.

Tom gasped as the canoe, gripped by the warring current, made a first sickening plunge. "Ugh, it's almost worse than the ice raft on Wind River," he thought. "My word, I'm glad it's Saxon has the paddle."

Saxon did not attempt to cut straight across the current. If he had, the canoe would have filled and sunk. He drove diagonally towards the other bank; under his powerful strokes the birch bark flew along at a rapid rate. Waves lapped along the gunwale, spray flew across them. Tom gripped the sides with convulsive energy, and forced himself by sheer strength of will to obey Saxon's order to sit still.

They were half-way across. A rock almost hidden by a surge of bubbling foam raised its ugly head directly in their path.

Saxon saw it and drove his paddle deep to avoid it.

Tom heard a short sharp crack, an exclamation sharper still. But it was not till Saxon raised his hands gripping a few inches of useless stump that the boy fully realised what had happened.

The paddle had snapped off short.

Instantly the bow of the canoe swung round, and missing the big rock by inches went flashing down stream.

"The other paddle—quick!" shouted Saxon.

Instantly it was in his hands.

The blade dipped deep in the boiling foam, and the bow of the canoe once more swung shorewards.

The force of the eddying current was tremendous. Tom saw the corded muscles stand out on Saxon's forearms as he wheeled the light craft across the rain-lashed flood.

Then—crack again! The second paddle had gone exactly like the first.

For a moment the whole extent of the calamity did not burst upon Tom. He knew so little of boats.

It was Saxon's face which told him. He did not start or swear as another man might have done. Only the muscles

about his mouth set and tightened as Tom had seen them do before in moments of extreme danger.

A shout from the bank. Kelly and Dubois were galloping hard along the brink of the creek.

"Throw us a rope," roared Saxon, above the boom of the flood.

Kelly was already unwinding a lariat from his saddle. He swung it round his head, and the black coils of the raw hide hissed through the rain-laden air.

But the distance was great and the gale full in Kelly's face. Tom gave a groan, as the rope smacked into the water far out of reach.

Kelly gathered the rope again with frantic haste. But the flood was rushing down as fast as a horse could gallop, and, long before he could coil the lariat again, the canoe had been whisked far ahead.

Tom saw the big Irishman drive spurs into his beast, and come tearing furiously along the bank, the wet thongs whirling round his head.

But the mud was deep, his horse laboured heavily, he began to fall behind.

"He'll never catch us," cried Tom.

"No," said Saxon curtly. "It's up to us to get ourselves out of this."

He was steering in some miraculous fashion with the stump of the broken paddle. The fierce current kept them in mid-stream, and they flashed down at a speed which almost took Tom's breath.

In a very few minutes Kelly and Dubois, galloping madly, and shouting as they rode, were out of sight. The two were alone on the yellow bosom of the rushing torrent. The last words Tom caught were from Dubois. They sounded like "De Grand Bouilli."

Facing Saxon, Tom could not see where they were going.

Suddenly the bow of the canoe seemed to drop away below him and the stern to tilt upwards. At the same moment

the speed became simply terrific. The roar of the mad waters was deafening.

"All right!" shouted Saxon. "Only a small rapid."

"A small rapid!" gasped Tom. "What must a big one be like?"

The banks rose on each side, and the flood, penned in a narrow channel, shot deep and swift down a long, straight slide. The sensation reminded Tom of a water chute he had once tried at a country fair.

"No falls, I hope," he cried.

"Don't know," replied Saxon. "Never was here before."

The scout's arms were elbow-deep in the icy flood, and, with skill which seemed to Tom almost superhuman, he kept the canoe's head straight with the stump of the paddle.

The banks shot up on either side. They became cliffs between which the canoe flashed onwards with dizzy speed. Great trees almost met overhead.

A deep booming rose above the hissing of the rapid. "A fall?" gasped Tom.

"No," came the reply.

Next instant the bow of the canoe whirled sideways with a suddenness that made Tom dizzy. He held his breath as a great black cliff loomed above him. It actually overhung the water, and the stream striking full upon its base heaped itself in a foaming wave, and then whirled to the left in a hissing fury of foam.

"Why didn't we hit the cliff?" was the thought that flashed through the boy's brain. It seemed a miracle.

Next instant the riddle was solved. The canoe fled round in a wide circle. They were in the grip of a whirlpool.

Dubois' last shout of warning came back to Tom, "Le Grand Bouilli."

He knew no French, but there was no mistaking their meaning. "The Great Boiling." No words could more perfectly describe the whirling chaos of leaping waves.

CHAPTER XIV

SAXON'S SACRIFICE

A MORE horrifying situation could not be imagined. The rushing river, forced back upon itself by the monstrous rock wall which barred its passage, had cut its way out by a narrow gorge at a sharp angle to its former course.

At the turn the floods of ages had scooped a great circular pool, undercutting the banks. So that the cliffs actually overhung on every side, except that through which the river escaped.

As a natural result, a whirlpool had been formed, a vortex which even at low water must have been most dangerous for any boat that incautiously ventured into it. At present with the vast volume of rain and melted snow sliding down the long rapid, and crashing against the opposing cliff, the place was horrifying.

The mad river leaped in pointed waves like those of a tide race when a gale blows across it.

The surface of the pool resembled that of a giant kettle, underneath which a fierce fire was raging.

Le Grand Bouilli, the Great Boiling, described it to a nicety, except that the water, instead of being hot, was icy cold. So cold that, apart from its fury, no swimmer could live in it for a minute.

It was round this awful boiling pot that the light birch bark bearing Tom Holt and Saxon was whirled like a feather in a gale.

The din was appalling, for the tall rock walls caught the

clamour of the seething waters, and the echoes beat madly to and fro in a deafening thunder.

A thud, a sudden stopping, then an icy shock. The canoe had struck a wave which burst over her bows like a shell, and, pouring over her like a cataract, left her half full, and almost water-logged.

"Bale!" roared Saxon.

For a moment Tom thought it was too late. He was sure the canoe was sinking. But he whipped off his hat and frantically swept the water out, while Saxon made desperate efforts with his broken stump of a paddle to keep the little craft out of the worst of the turmoil.

The antics of the canoe were extraordinary. Now she was lying on her side, with the water rushing over her gunwale; again she seemed to be standing on her head, her bows almost buried while her stern was tilted high in the air.

These were the moments of peril, when Saxon could not reach the water with his wretched remains of paddle. Once she broached-to she was gone.

A minute passed. The canoe was almost clear of water. Saxon was still managing to hold her out of the worst of it.

Once more Tom was filled with amazement at the extraordinary skill of his companion. It seemed an absolute miracle that such a tiny, frail vessel could live for five seconds in this war of raging waters.

But what was to happen? Surely it was useless to fight like this for a few more minutes of life. There was no escape. The end was certain. Sooner or later one of these great breakers would catch her broadside on and swamp and overwhelm her in an instant.

Tom, baling like mad, snatched a glance at Saxon. The scout's eyes were fixed on something. What was it?

"Can he see any way out of it?" was the idea that flashed into Tom's mind.

Still baling, the boy glanced round the pool. No, it was hopeless.

Rocky cliffs all round, smooth near the water where past floods had polished the stone like glass, higher up broken and craggy, higher still coated with gloomy firs which seemed almost to meet overhead and which cut off most of the pale grey light which filtered down from the rain-laden sky.

Stay, there was one spot where escape seemed possible.

Saxon's eyes, Tom saw, were fixed on the narrow channel where the pent-up stream burst its way out of the cauldron.

On the right-hand side of this channel a promontory of broken rock dipped sharply to the water, and in this, some six feet above the level of the flood, a tree had rooted itself.

A small tree of what sort Tom had no idea, but it grew out sideways and stretched its gnarled and leafless branches horizontally over the surface of the raging pool.

Tom caught all this in one rapid backward glance.

"The tree?" he shouted, pointing wildly.

"Yes. If we reach it, jump. At once. No waiting."

Saxon's voice was a mere gasp. His face was streaming from his Herculean exertions.

A gleam of hope roused Tom from the despair which had overwhelmed him. He pulled himself together and baled the harder.

It was fearful work. No sooner had he got the canoe half clear than a fresh wave would leap furiously over the side, and again the little craft would settle, so that it seemed it must sink the very next instant.

They had been three times round the pool. Not all round it. The spin was behind the angle formed by the inlet and outlet streams.

Each time that the canoe passed opposite the outlet Saxon made a furious effort to drive her out of the sullen, circling rush of the back-wash.

With a proper paddle he would have done it in a moment; with two feet of stick, which was all he had left, it seemed impossible.

One thing gave Tom hope. They were still on the outer

ring of the pool. There was no deep central suck. On the contrary, the centre of the whirl, probably owing to some curious conformation of the bottom or of unseen rocks beneath the surface, was not a pit, but a spouting uproar of pointed waves. On the summit of these sprang and danced logs, branches, dead leaves, and grass-rubbish of all descriptions which had been swept down by the savage flood.

At each turn the worst danger came when the canoe passed close to the cliff, exactly opposite to the point where the river entered the cauldron.

Here it met the great wave caused by the recoil of the roaring torrent from the sheer rock face. The heaped-up water sprang back and curled over on itself just as an ocean wave does when it strikes a perpendicular cliff.

A fourth time the canoe, fast in the grip of the whirling current, was borne swiftly towards the danger point. She seemed to be driving into the very heart of the hill of crested foam. In sheer desperation Tom made a frantic effort to help Saxon by paddling with his hat, but it was not successful.

The canoe leaped upwards on a mound of dark water, swung sideways, actually grazed the rock, and then swept downwards and round with a giddy rush that made Tom gasp.

The curling top of the wave struck Tom in the back with a crash that nearly knocked the breath out of him, and the canoe was again half full with ice-cold water.

"Bale!" shouted Saxon; and Tom baled with fury.

Another wave rushed over her left side. She sagged horribly. Still Tom baled, but it was hopeless. He felt she was sinking beneath him.

But the wave had swung her far to the right. The black rock wall of the cauldron was almost within arm's reach. Tom saw that they were heading straight for the hanging tree.

Could they reach it?

Only a few yards more. How Saxon worked!

Ah, she was going!

"Jump!" roared Saxon, and the rolling echoes repeated the shout high above the rushing clamour of the flood.

Tom shot up in his seat. He glimpsed the black tracery of branches overhead, and made a mad leap upwards.

His fingers closed upon a bough, a long, slender branch which hung sideways from the main trunk.

It bent horribly under the boy's weight and gave until Tom's legs nearly dragged in the icy flood. He clung like grim death and, working his hands one over the other, struggled desperately upwards.

A crack. For a sickening instant he felt the whole branch was breaking away from the main stem. Then a second bough was within reach. He shifted one hand to that and divided his weight between the two.

His legs were clear of the water. He swung them up, crooked one knee over a third branch, and with a last sharp struggle was seated on the main trunk, and safe.

Then he looked round for Saxon.

Where was Saxon? A gasp of dismay burst from Tom as he realised that Saxon was not in the tree.

He looked down.

He was just in time to see some dark object whirl round the rock point into the outlet.

It was the canoe, or what remained of it. Clinging to the long, thin, black hull was a human figure, the head alone above water.

It was Saxon.

Next instant, canoe and man had flashed out of sight round the corner and disappeared down the roaring gut, through which the tortured waters found their way out of the cauldron.

Tom gave a groan of despair. Why, oh! why had Saxon not jumped at the same moment as himself? The reason flashed upon him like a blow. Saxon had seen that the bough, the only one in reach, would not bear the weight of two.

He had deliberately thrown away his own chances of safety in order to make sure of his friend's.

When the conviction forced itself upon Tom, a feeling of sick horror came over him. He turned faint and giddy, and for an instant was on the point of letting go his hold and dropping back into the raging cauldron from which he had so narrowly escaped.

"Why didn't he let me go?" he wailed. "What good am I without him?" And he clung there helplessly.

"Buck up! Never give in!" It was as if Saxon's own voice was in his ear.

"I will buck up. I won't give in," cried Tom aloud. And, pulling himself together with a desperate effort, he began to scramble along the trunk towards the rocks.

"I might help him," he said to himself. He remembered Saxon's great physical strength, his cool courage, and his amazing resource.

He tried to keep these things in mind, yet all the time he was conscious of a horrible dull despair which gnawed at his heart like a wolf.

He reached the rocks, crawled round the steep point, and found himself looking down into the river.

A lane of rolling, tossing foam ran furiously between lofty, perpendicular banks, stretching far away into the distance.

In all that vista of wild flood there was no sign of life. Nothing appeared on the roaring surface but logs, branches, and other flood débris which the ever-rising waters had ripped from the broken banks above.

Tom's heart sank to his boots. Again he wished himself at the bottom of the raging river.

What to do? He strove manfully to collect his scattered faculties! Here he was, stranded, alone, foodless, and weaponless. He was on the far bank of the river, hopelessly cut off from Dubois, Ryder, and Kelly.

Even if they could ever push their horses along the rocky

forest-clad cliffs, past which he and Saxon had spun at such awful speed, they could not reach him across the booming flood. He could not make them hear, nor they him.

One gleam of consolation came to him. At any rate, he was on the same side of the river as his father.

Even so, what could he do? Nothing. He was helpless. Without Saxon he was like a lost child. He had no idea where to go, what to do.

CHAPTER XV

TWO TO ONE

TOM braced himself again and set his teeth. "I'm not going to chuck it like a whipped dog," he muttered fiercely. "First thing is to find Saxon. Alive or dead, I've got to find him."

Standing on the point of rock between the whirlpool and the outlet, he gazed down the cliffs bordering the river.

"Can't go along there, that's flat!" he said. "Must climb to the top of the bank. That's my one chance."

It was still raining, and wisps of grey mist swirled among the trees along the cliff-tops, or dropped into the cañon, hiding the rushing flood.

As for the cliff itself, it was at least a hundred feet high and almost as steep as the side of a house.

"Looks pretty beastly," muttered Tom, staring upwards.

But he was not the sort to waste time in thinking of difficulties. Anxiety for Saxon swamped all other fears.

He started.

A trained mountaineer with nailed boots, a rope, and an alpenstock might have been forgiven for thinking twice of that cliff. All down it red, muddy water was streaming and trickling, the rocks were greasy with moisture, and the patches of turf were rotten with frost and rain. It was blowing heavily, and the gusts shrieking up the gorge threatened to tear Tom from his slender hand-holds.

For the first part of the distance it was all sheer rock. Far above Tom could see brush, and higher still trees. Once he

was in the bushes he would be all right, but the thing was to reach them.

Patience and pluck did it. Yard by yard he won his way, zigzagging along the sheer rock face while the flooded river roared below and the growing gale swooped upon him and tried to tear him from his hold.

The bushes at last. Stout, twisted roots to hold by ; and, pressing on with all possible speed, Tom reached the summit of the cliff, and for a moment leant panting against the wet brown bole of a tall fir.

Only for a moment. As soon as he could regain breath he was hurrying on again, his feet sinking deep in the rain-soaked loam.

The river curved some half a mile further on. This was the point Tom made for. His one faint hope was that Saxon, clinging to the canoe, had been carried down the long straight rapid, and had found some means of landing beyond.

In less than ten minutes he had reached the point where the river swung westwards, and he stood on the extreme edge of the tall bluff, gazing down.

The channel was wider there, and the yellow surface of the flood was broken by many dark points. They were granite boulders amongst which the swift water chafed and tumbled in a maze of foam.

Tom stared down with intense earnestness. He could see nothing.

"Suppose I never expected to," groaned the poor boy.

He walked listlessly onwards, then all of a sudden stopped with a start of amazement.

"The canoe! Yes. Those planks are part of it. And what's that on the rock beyond?"

Undoubtedly there was some dark object stretched at full length on the rugged surface of a huge boulder in mid-stream.

But what was it? Tom stood motionless, straining his eyes through the mist of pouring rain.

"If only I had a pair of glasses," he gasped.

Good as were his eyes he could not be sure what that dark thing was that lay so still on the top of the rock island out in the centre of the roaring flood.

A fiercer gust of wind than any yet. It tore the mists away and, for an instant, left the surface of the river clear.

"It is! It's Saxon!" cried Tom tersely. Next moment he had hurled himself over the edge and was scrambling madly down the cliff towards the river.

Lucky indeed that the bank was less steep here than at the spot where he had first scaled it. Otherwise Tom's life would not have been worth a farthing.

Mad with excitement, he crashed breathlessly downwards through the brushwood, and sprang or dropped from ledge to ledge.

How he was ever going to get Saxon off that rock he had no notion. He never gave it a thought. His one idea was to get to the bottom and find out whether his friend was alive or dead.

The mere fact that Saxon had been able to get out of the rushing flood on to the rock argued that there must still be life in him.

Here, where the cliff was less steep, brush covered it all down from the summit to the very edge of the river. Clinging to roots or branches, Tom swung himself like a monkey from terrace to terrace.

But the very ease of the climbing betrayed him. In his wild haste he seized a rotten bough. It snapped, and he fell.

Making a wild effort to save himself, he seized a boulder which seemed firmly embedded in the cliff face. But frost and rain had loosened it. It gave, and boy and boulder fell together.

By sheer good luck the stone missed Tom, and, rebounding, went crashing down the steep slope, sheering the bushes in its rushing flight towards the river.

It was a miraculous escape.

As for Tom, he dropped sideways on a narrow ledge with

a shock that completely knocked the breath out of his body, but without stunning him.

For a moment he lay there helpless, and as he lay he could have sworn that a sharp, startled cry came to his ears.

Up he scrambled, dizzy, but wild with excitement. He took it for granted that it was Saxon who had heard the falling stone and shouted.

No. Saxon lay, as before, motionless on the rock. It was plain that he was stunned or insensible.

Tom stared round in every direction. Not a sign of life, either of man or beast.

"I heard someone—I swear I did," muttered the boy. "It wasn't Saxon, and it wasn't Dubois or the other chaps, because they're the other side of the river. Who was it—that's the question?"

"Sound came from below," he went on. "That's dead sure. Someone scared by that rock falling. Wonder how Saxon would figure it out."

Tom moved cautiously to the edge of the ledge on to which he had fallen. He peered over.

"Whoever he is, he's hidden again," he said to himself. "That looks fishy. Is it possible that any of Stark's chaps have got as far down the river as this?"

For a moment or two he crouched there, wondering what was best to do. The sight of poor Saxon lying helpless on that rock forced him on.

"Whoever the chap is, the chances are he didn't see me," he argued. "I bet he thought the wind or rain brought down that stone. Best thing I can do is to creep down very quietly and try to get a view of him."

Saxon's lessons in woodcraft had already taught Tom Holt how to move noiselessly, and he went down through that brush as silently as a cat. Not that there was really much risk of being heard. The roar of the flood and the melancholy moan of the gale in the fir tree filled the gorge with sound.

The bush, though leafless, was thick and tangled, and Tom

had to stick to the closest covert. He was really more afraid of being seen than heard.

He had slowly progressed about another fifty feet down the cliff, and had reached a ledge much wider than any yet, when a second sound made him fairly jump.

It was a sharp click, and it came from just the other side of a big, jutting rock.

For an instant Tom stood breathless. Then with cat-like steps he clambered up the rock and cautiously peered over.

Just beyond was a broad ledge littered with slabs of rock which had fallen from above.

Lying flat upon one of these great slabs was a man.

He had his back to Tom, so that the boy could not see his face. What Tom could see was that the fellow was cuddling a rifle to his cheek. It was the click of the lock which Tom had heard.

The man was aiming very carefully at something below. It did not take Tom a second to realise that the fellow's target was the insensible body of Saxon.

In a sudden flame of rage, Tom made a wild spring from the top of the jutting rock, and dashed furiously at the scoundrel.

The man heard him coming, and swung round, giving Tom a glimpse of a scarred, scowling face.

It was Lomax, one of the two men who had decoyed Mr. Holt away from Berrymead Farm.

Lomax was quick, but Tom was quicker.

The rifle cracked, but the bullet missed Tom. Before Lomax could gain his feet, Tom was on him like a fury, bowling him over on his back and rolling him quite off the slab he had been lying on.

Lomax fought like a mad creature. All Tom's weight was upon him, yet he writhed like a half-scotched snake, the whole time pouring out a stream of savage imprecations.

"Quiet, you brute!" growled Tom. "Quiet, or I'll hurt you."

Lomax struggled more wildly than before. He actually snapped at Tom's hands like a savage dog.

Tom shifted his grip, caught the man by the collar, lifted him, and slammed him down hard against the ground.

The back of his head came bang on a stone. Lomax gave a shudder, straightened out, and lay still enough.

"Stunned you, have I?" growled Tom, through set teeth. "Serves you right, you wretch."

Tom got up quickly, and stood an instant, staring down at Lomax. "Is he dead," he wondered, "or only stunned? Wonder if it's safe to leave the brute? Or had I better tie him? Sooner I get down to Saxon the better. Water's rising still. May wash him off that rock."

"I'll chance it," he said, and was actually turning when something crashed upon his head, and he fell heavily to the ground.

When Tom came dazedly back to a consciousness of his surroundings, he was lying on his back on the ledge, and a hard-faced man was standing over him, looking down with his thin lips twisted in a malicious grin.

Tom had no difficulty in identifying him. He was Fulton, the other of the precious pair who had, with Lomax, humbugged his father into leaving England.

"Reckon you thought the cliff had fallen on you?" jeered the man. "Right good shot o' mine that was. I ain't forgotten the whirlers I used to pitch when I played base ball."

Tom made no answer. There really didn't seem anything to say, unless to revile himself for not keeping his eyes peeled. Fulton must have got out on the ledge right above him before he threw the big clod of earth which had so effectually knocked him out.

"Seems to me you've done Lomax down right smart," drawled Fulton. His nasal, down-east twang forcibly reminded Tom of the first time he had seen him.

"I reckon he'll be kind o' cross when he comes round again," went on Fulton.

The heavy shock of the blow was passing. Tom realised that Lomax was still on the ground beside him. He also realised that he was in a most uncommonly tight place. To his credit, be it said, he thought of Saxon's danger far more than of his own.

The remembrance of Saxon lying stretched on that bare rock in the centre of the still-rising river spurred him fiercely. He stirred.

"Reckon I'd lie still if I was you," drawled Fulton. There was a long-barrelled Smith and Wesson in his right hand. Tom vaguely wondered why he had not used it already.

"'Spose I'll have to tie you," went on Fulton, with apparent regret, and at the same time pulling a length of cord from his pocket with his left hand. "It won't do to have such a desperate character loose around. Might take it into your head to try an' hurt me."

Tom lay still as a mouse. With eyes half closed, he watched the American keenly under his lids. Force being useless, he had recourse to strategy. If he could only make Fulton believe that he was still half silly from the blow!

Fulton bent over him, shifting the pistol to his left hand as he did so. Tom saw that the muzzle pointed full at his body. If it went off it seemed at least ten to one that the bullet would bury itself in his heart or his lungs.

"H'm, don't look as if he could do much," muttered Fulton, as he seized one of Tom's hands and deftly slipped a noose over it. "Still, it's best to be on the safe side."

At the same time Tom, lying perfectly motionless and limp, was thinking desperately. "It's my one chance to save Saxon," he muttered. "Do or die."

And on the instant he let drive with his long left leg.

Tom had played football pretty regularly with the village team before his father became so hard up. But in all his life he had never kicked harder.

His heavy boot caught the American full in the stomach. The man gave a queer gasping cry and crumpled up like a doll drained of sawdust. The force of the kick lifted him clean over Tom's head, and there he lay groaning and writhing on the steaming rocks. The pistol exploded as he fell, but the bullet buried itself harmlessly in the ground.

Now was Tom's chance to run. Both his enemies were beyond harm for the minute. There was plenty of time for him to get beyond reach before they recovered.

Yet he hesitated. The situation was a complicated one. Tom was thinking furiously. These were the precious pair who had his father in their charge. If they were here, then his father was certainly not far off.

Tom was mad to be off to find him.

But Saxon ! Saxon who had helped him so often, who had done so much for him. Saxon was lying there helpless on the mid-stream rock with the flood quickly crawling up towards him.

His duty was to Saxon. He must save him first. If he left him, these scoundrels would soon settle his hash, even if the flood did not first wash him from his rock refuge. They would use him as a target, as Tomax had been about to do a few minutes previously.

It was not merely danger for Saxon—it was certain death.

And that reminded Tom. One thing he had completely forgotten in his flurry. These fellows were still armed. He had to take their weapons. That would pull their teeth for the present.

He stooped swiftly and snatched up Fulton's pistol, which he had dropped as he fell.

The man was fast recovering, and he made a snatch at the weapon when he saw Tom's purpose. But the boy was too quick for him.

Tom jumped back, covering him. "Lie still !" he ordered so fiercely that Fulton subsided, glaring at him with eyes burning with hate.

"I've a mind to use this against you," growled Tom between set teeth. "You deserve it a thousand times, and it would simplify things a whole lot."

His finger crooked on the trigger. Fulton gave a gasp of terror. From Tom's expression he fully believed his last minute was come.

"No, I can't," muttered the boy almost in despair. Then of a sudden his glance fell upon Fulton's cord, which had slipped from his wrist, and lay there trampled on the muddy earth.

His eyes flashed. "I'll make you safe, my beauty!" he cried exultingly, as he quickly picked it up.

Pistol in hand, he was stepping forward when suddenly a hand grasped his ankle from behind.

Caught unawares, Tom made a desperate effort to keep his balance, failed, and fell flat on his face.

Next instant Lomax and Fulton both were upon him.

CHAPTER XVI

ALONE WITH THE ENEMY

TOM fought like a fury. Though taken entirely by surprise, and in spite of his heavy fall, he struggled so desperately that the men had their work cut out to hold him.

The thought of Saxon helpless out there on the rock in mid-river nerved him to such efforts that Lomax and Fulton were unable to pin him.

One hand he twisted in Lomax's hair, and though the man pounded him savagely with iron-hard fists, Tom held on with such a savage grip that the scar-faced scoundrel could not get free.

For more than a minute the three struggling forms writhed and heaved and tumbled together till the wet ground was churned to mud, and the steam rose thickly in the cold, rain-laden air.

But what chance has a youngster of eighteen, however active and muscular, with the weight of two grown men on top of him? Tom's struggles slackened gradually, and Lomax, twisting round, gripped him by the throat.

The ugly face with the long scar glowing angry red was close against his, the man's hot breath hissed upon him. He tried furiously to kick, but Fulton was kneeling on his legs.

Tighter and tighter the knotted fingers clutched his wind-pipe. Tom struggled vainly for breath. Black specks floated across his eyes. Then all went red. He was choking, dying. His grip fell away from Lomax's hair.

"Steady, you idiot!" cried Fulton, jumping up and pulling Lomax off. "He's worth more alive than dead," he added cynically.

Tom recovered to find himself lying on his side. His hands were lashed securely behind his back, and the two men stood over him.

Fulton was smiling—the hard smile which Tom remembered so well at Berrymead. Lomax was glaring and rubbing the back of his head. Tom saw with a flash of savage satisfaction that there was a lump there as big as a pigeon's egg.

"Only wish I'd bumped him a bit harder," muttered the boy fiercely.

Lomax caught the words, and suddenly kicked Tom savagely on the side.

"Cowardly brute!" gasped Tom, still unsubdued.

"I'll teach ye!" growled Lomax, and was repeating the kick when Fulton stopped him. "You dolt! Remember what the chief said. That temper of yours'll get you into trouble yet."

Lomax glared. For a moment Tom almost hoped he would fly at the other.

"Reckon you've forgotten Saxon," continued Fulton, with cool contempt. "Pick up your rifle."

Lomax's bloodshot eyes flared. He sprang for his rifle.

"Ha, I'd forgot," he snarled. "I reckon we'll hev that shooting match ez was interrupted jest now. An' the cub shall watch it."

He seized Tom and jerked him up standing. Tom's feet were free. He let out a kick which, if it had taken effect, would certainly have broken Lomax's leg.

But Lomax sprang aside, and before Tom with his bound hands could recover himself, Fulton had tripped him, and down he went again in the mud.

Mad with rage, Lomax rushed at him, but once more Fulton stopped him.

"Serves you jest exactly right," he remarked with his dry

Yankee drawl. "You ought to have tied his legs before you let him up."

As he spoke he whipped out some cord from his pocket, and tied Tom's ankles. Not tight, but with about a yard of slack. "Now," he said, "I reckon he can walk all right, but he can't do any kicking wuth talking about."

For a second time Tom was dragged up to his feet. By this time he was half dazed, and wholly despairing. He could do nothing else to help Saxon. These brutes would butcher his friend in cold blood. He could think of nothing else. Even his father, whom he knew must be somewhere near, was forgotten.

Lomax seized an end of cord which hung from Tom's bound wrists, and drove him across the little terrace on which the fight had taken place.

"Yew hold him, Fulton," he exclaimed as he snapped open the breech of his rifle and slipped in a fresh cartridge. "I'll lay yew a dollar I'll finish Saxon the first shot."

Tom was almost mad with misery and rage. He lost all control of himself. "You filthy, low-down, cold-blooded murderer!" he fairly screamed.

"Stirred ye up, hev I, cub?" chuckled Lomax, and struck Tom's helpless face with his open hand.

He stepped up on the rock where Tom had seen him first, and which gave a full view of the river above the low bushes which lined the edge of the terrace.

"Dern this mist!" he growled. "It's thick ez prairie smoke across the water."

How Tom prayed that it would grow thicker.

But it was not to be. A strong gust of wind came roaring up the valley, shrieking among the rocks, moaning in the tall fir tops. "Thet's right. It's a blowing off," cried Lomax with satisfaction. "Now we'll get him."

He raised his rifle. Tom, in fascinated horror, pushed forward to the extreme edge of the ledge. Fulton, though he held fast to the rope end, did nothing to prevent him.

The mist was rapidly rolling up. It still lay in billowing clouds across the water just below, but less than a quarter of a mile away the whole width of the flooded river, with its wide, swirling surface dotted with rounded rocks, was plainly visible.

Lomax, chuckling harshly, cuddled his rifle to his cheek.

Before the gale the mist rushed in broken wreaths, and the valley below cleared like magic. Next moment the big flat rock on which Saxon had been lying was visible.

A furious ejaculation from Lomax, a gasp from Tom ! The rock was bare.

For the moment Tom could not believe his eyes. Was it the right rock ? Yes, he could swear to that. Its exact shape and size were branded on his memory.

But Saxon was gone. There was not a sign of him.

It was not the flood which had carried him off. Though the river seemed still to be rising, a good foot of the rock showed yet above the rushing rapid which surrounded it.

Tom was so utterly amazed that he stood there like a frozen figure, paying not the slightest attention to the string of furious imprecations which poured from Lomax's lips.

What had happened ? He strained his eyes across the waste of whirling water and black rocks to the opposite bank. Not one sign of life.

There was only one possible explanation. Saxon had revived, tried to climb off the rock, and been swept down those boiling rapids.

Evidently Fulton thought the same.

"The river's saved you a cartridge," he observed drily, cutting short Lomax's frantic outburst. "Reckon I wouldn't waste so much breath if I were you. We've got the boy. That's all that matters. The quicker we put him in safety the better."

Lomax stepped down sulkily off the rock. "Take him to the Roost ?" he asked harshly.

Fulton stopped him with a quick, contemptuous gesture.

Leaving Tom, he took Lomax by the arm and drew him aside out of earshot. They talked for a minute in low tones, of which Tom, strain his ears as he might, could not catch a word.

Stupefied with misery, poor Tom could hardly collect his wits. Yet, bearing in mind Saxon's advice, he did his best to pull himself together.

The Roost. Ah, that was Stark's secret stronghold. Why were they not taking him there? There were two explanations. One that there was no horse for him to ride, the other—and more likely—that he and his father were not to meet.

Yes, that was it. Of course, his father as yet knew nothing of the true state of affairs. He had never heard of Stark. He was under the impression that these men were taking him straight to Sunk River. He did not know that his son was on this side of the Atlantic. Most certainly these men would not risk his setting eyes on Tom.

What would they do with him? That was the question. He had not long to wait. Here came Lomax striding back towards him.

The man seized the loose end of rope which hung from the boy's hands.

"Git up!" he cried, catching Tom a cruel cut. "Walk sharp, or I'll know the reason why."

Tom found himself driven like a sheep back up the steep side of the river cliff. Tied as he was, walking was desperately difficult. He could not take a long step, and his hands, of course, were useless.

But the scar-faced brute had no mercy. Every time the boy fell he scourged him till he managed to scramble up again.

Tom Holt will not easily forget that dreadful struggle uphill, through the wild forest, among the crags and the giant fir trees.

The mist swirled across the face of the mountain, and

the rain beat pitilessly down, and Lomax, behind him, jeered cruelly and thrashed him at every stumble.

Tom, utterly helpless, boiled with rage. He would have given worlds to have his hands free, and just one chance to meet the bullying ruffian on equal terms. But what was the good? He was absolutely at Lomax's mercy, and all he could do was to keep his mouth tightly shut, and not give the blackguard the satisfaction of hearing a single sound.

Where was Lomax taking him to? The question urged itself upon him.

Evidently they did not mean to kill him. "Worth more alive than dead," Fulton had said. And Saxon had told Colonel Westcott that Stark's idea would be to get hold of him and hold him as a hostage for his father's signature to the deed of sale of Sunk River.

Tom dreaded that the outlaws must have some secret haunt in the mountains where they would keep him for the present.

Up and up they climbed. The mountain rose high above the cliffs which bordered the river. Sometimes the slope was easy, again it was so steep that Tom, with his helpless hands and the cord between his feet, was hard put to it to move at all.

At the end of an hour he reckoned they were considerably more than a thousand feet above the river.

The higher they went, the heavier grew the gale. The trees bent and swayed in the blast, and now and then a small branch snapped sharply from its parent stem and was whirled to the ground.

At times Tom was almost swept from his feet. The cold rain, driven by the gale, stung his face like pellets of small shot, and robbed him of what little breath was left him by the steepness of the hill.

For the most part the mist hid everything at a few yards' distance, but at last the gale grew so furious that the sky began to clear.

Glancing back, Tom saw the river like a twisted brown riband far below, while the great pines on the lower slopes were dwarfed to toys by the distance.

Exhausted and breathless, every step was a struggle. His ankles were sore from the chafing of the rope, his face was cut by many falls, his soaking clothes were covered with mud, his condition was altogether deplorable.

Even Lomax was puffing and blowing. His taunts and blows were far less frequent.

The clouds blew past, the rain ceased, blue sky showed, a hard, windy blue across which long mare's tails were thinly strung. Tom saw that they were near the summit of the hill, but between them and it, was a steep bluff covered with scattered trees, which bent like whips in the roaring blast.

Tom faced the last slope manfully, but failed to climb it. He slipped back, made a vain effort to recover, failed, and fell.

"Get up!" cried Lomax, with fierce imprecations. The rope-end cut Tom's cheek.

Tom set his teeth to curb the rage which consumed him.

"It's no good," he said, "you'll have to untie my hands."

"I'll see you—somewhere else—first!" retorted Lomax, with a lively recollection of the handling he had received from the stalwart young farmer's son a little earlier in the afternoon.

"All right. Then I stay here," said Tom quietly. He was quite beyond caring what happened. "You can kill me, but I can't climb."

Again Lomax lifted the rope-end. But he must have seen something in Tom's face which showed him that violence had reached its limit.

He dropped the scourge, and sulkily took a long piece of stout cord from an inside pocket. He made it fast round Tom's waist, lugged the boy to his feet, and then, going ahead, pulled him roughly upwards.

Tom had an almost irresistible temptation to fling himself

backwards and jerk his persecutor down. But though it was quite on the cards that he might damage him badly, he knew that to do such a thing was equal to suicide. Ten to one he would kill himself if he went backwards down this precipitous rocky slope.

There came a gust fiercer than any yet. Screaming like a pack of wolves, it swept across the exposed face of the mountain.

A report like the discharge of a heavy gun, a crashing sound, then a shadow swept across Tom's eyes, and something struck him heavily upon the head and knocked him over backwards.

As he fell a shriek of agony pealed out—a shriek so horrible that it hurt like a stab.

Tom felt himself strike the ground. He rebounded, turning a back somersault, and again his shoulders thudded on wet earth.

He made up his mind that he was going to the bottom, a fall which would infallibly kill him. This would have happened had not the loose cord between his ankles caught upon a projecting rock and brought him up all standing with a heavy jerk.

When he recovered a little from the shock he found himself in a hopeless position. He was hanging head downwards on a slope so steep that it was next door to sheer cliff.

His ankle rope was firmly hitched over a sharpish rock, but his head and shoulders were on grass. With his hands tied as they were behind his back, he was about as utterly helpless as a man could possibly be.

The cold gale whistled through his soaked clothes, and chilled him to the very bone.

CHAPTER XVII

THE VALLEY OF ROCKS

It was exactly as Tom had thought. Saxon had seen that the bough was not strong enough to bear the double weight, and had deliberately refrained from jumping as the canoe swung under it.

Tom's spring drove the already sinking craft clean under water. Saxon was on the point of letting go the wreck and striking out for the shore, when a freak of the whirling currents shot it into the outlet, and, clinging to the waterlogged craft, Saxon found himself shooting at terrific speed down a short, narrow rapid.

It was hardly a minute before he was out of this and in the more open water beyond.

Through narrow lanes of roaring yellow foam between the jagged black rocks the flood spun him helpless. Rock after rock passed just out of reach, the deadly chill of the snow water was rapidly numbing him, and the big frontiersman had almost given up hope when he, canoe and all, was driven broadside on to a low, flat rock with such force as nearly stunned him.

Saxon had just strength left to make a last scramble which landed him safely on the flat top of the rock, then he collapsed, with his head spinning, about as near insensible as he had ever been in his life.

For some minutes he lay perfectly still, indeed, quite unable to move. It was while he lay like this that Tom caught sight of him from the cliff above.

Gradually he pulled round. He looked about him. The river here was a couple of hundred feet wide. His rock refuge was not far from the middle, but rather nearer the left-hand bank.

His first idea was to see if he could possibly cross to either bank by jumping from rock to rock. One glance showed this to be hopeless. He was separated from the nearest by a twenty-foot channel of churning flood.

"Looks ugly," he said to himself. "One comfort, Tom's safe. No doubt he'll try to help me, but he can't do much without a rope. And the river's making such a row we shan't be able to hear one another."

"Hulloa!" Saxon gave a sharp start as a rifle-shot rang out high up on the right-hand bank. It was the report of Eomax's rifle as Tom jumped at him.

But Saxon could not know this, and he could see nothing, because of the trees and bushes which clothed the bluff.

What Saxon did know was that Tom himself had no firearm. Therefore it was someone else who had fired, and presumably one of Stark's crowd. Fulton and Eomax, he knew, were on that side of the river. He was desperately anxious.

As he stood staring helplessly up into the mist which had now again shrouded the cleft side, a sharp, shrill call came suddenly from the left-hand bank.

With a throb of keen relief, Saxon saw Dubois, mounted on a steaming horse, pull up just opposite.

He shouted something. What, Saxon could not hear. The roar of the flood drowned the voice.

Saxon made signs. Dubois understood, and nodded his head violently. Saxon saw him loosen the rope from the high pommel of his cowboy saddle, then pluckily force his horse girth-deep into the screaming flood, and, whirling the rope, sent it hissing out across the rapids.

The first time it fell short. Dubois whipped it back, recoiled it, and threw it again, this time further up-stream. The wide

coils circled, straightened, and the end fell across the water just above the rock. In an instant Saxon had snatched it, made it fast round his waist, signed to Dubois to tighten, then boldly jumped into the icy flood.

The fierce stream swung him down; he was battered heavily against the rocks. Only for his enormous strength he would most certainly have been killed.

At last, bruised, bleeding, but fortunately without broken bones, he was hauled safe out on the bank.

"Well done, little man!" were his first words. "That was a fine throw of yours! The worst of it is we're on the wrong side. We've got to get over on t'other quick as we can. Tom Holt's in trouble."

Dubois' face was grave.

"Ee poor Holt! But I did sink you was both drowned when I did see ze paddles break."

"It was that Injun," said Saxon shortly as he shook the water from his clothes. "Treacherous beast! He'd cut 'em half through. Another plant of Stark's, I'll be bound.

"There's not a minute to waste," he went on quickly, "only I hope to goodness those brutes haven't killed Tom. If they have, they'll pay for it." Saxon's strong face bore an expression which might well have frightened even Stark himself.

As he spoke he was striding away up the river bank so fast that Dubois' horse had to amble to keep up.

"We're all right, Dubois. You've got your axe, I see."

"But ze river is too wide," objected the French Canadian.

"Not up by the whirlpool. Here we are."

They had reached the narrow gorge where the river left the whirlpool. From bank to bank the distance was not more than thirty feet. Almost before Dubois was out of his saddle Saxon had the axe, and, choosing a good-sized fir which grew near the edge of the bluff, the white splinters began to fly under his ringing strokes.

The two finest axe-men in the world are the North-West

lumber-man and the Georgia negro. Each can throw a tree to drive a peg placed in the ground at the length of the trunk.

In less than five minutes the tall fir trembled, swayed, then cracked to its doom, and lay spanning the gorge with its sturdy trunk.

"Ze 'orse. What shall I do wiz him?" inquired Dubois.

"Take the saddle off and turn him loose. He'll find his way back to the fort." Dubois did so, hid the saddle in a hole under a rock, and followed Saxon across the narrow bridge.

Saxon hit off Tom's tracks in no time, and followed them up the cliff at a pace that made his companion puff and blow.

The muddy state of the ground and the freshness of the trail made it easy enough to follow the footmarks, but it was marvellous how exactly Saxon read from them every incident, big or little, of the boy's climb up the cliff and down to the terrace where he had met Lomax.

"They didn't kill him. Thank goodness for that!" were his first words when he had examined the site of Tom's fight with Lomax. "And here they were both on him. Looks as if he'd held them a bit. That boy's got the right stuff in him, Dubois."

"Ah, here they've divided! One's gone off with Tom, t'other's gone to pick up his father. See!"

Dubois, himself no mean woodman, nodded gravely. "Zat is so. Zey would not let zem see one another. Zey take ze old Holt to ze Roost."

"He can wait. Where will they take Tom? That's the question."

Dubois stood a moment thinking. "Zere is an old dug-out up in ze hills. I was nevaire there, but I 'ave 'eard zem spek of it."

"The very place they'd take him to. Is it far?"

"I sink it vair close."

"Come along, then. The tracks are plain."

"I come," said Dubois. "But be vair careful, Saxon," he added imploringly. "Zat Lomax, he is dangerous."

"He's a fiend incarnate," replied Saxon grimly, and strode on untiringly up the mountain side.

"The boy's legs are tied. Look, he fell here." Saxon's voice was hoarse and deep.

Dubois, struggling against the fury of the gale, could only grunt assent.

They reached the base of the last steep rise. Suddenly Saxon stopped. "Look!" he cried, then dashed away up the hill.

Dubois looked, and saw Tom Holt's body hanging head downwards on the face of the bluff. He followed Saxon at full speed.

"Gone, I'm afraid!" Saxon's voice broke as he looked up at Dubois. He had already cut Tom loose, and laid him gently on a level spot behind the shelter of a rock.

The boy's face was dreadful. It was leaden, and his lips were blue. Hanging by the heels will kill you as surely as hanging by the neck if you remain long enough in that position.

Saxon stooped with his ear against Tom's chest. A moment of intense listening. Then he looked up. "Heart's still beating," he cried eagerly. "Keep a sharp look out, Dubois."

He began furiously rubbing Tom's numbed arms and legs. Dubois felt in a deep breast pocket and produced a large metal flask. "Gif him some of zis," he exclaimed, handing it to Saxon.

Saxon grasped it gladly. "Good man!" he cried. "This gives us a chance."

He forced a few drops of the spirit between Tom's clenched teeth, then poured some on his own hands and began rubbing the boy again.

How he worked! Dubois stared. "He is not man," he muttered. "He is iron." Indeed, considering what

Saxon had been through in the last few hours, his efforts were amazing.

In spite of the bitter gale, perspiration was standing in thick beads on Saxon's forehead when Tom at last gave a deep sigh and opened his eyes.

At sight of Saxon his face showed such utter amazement that the big frontiersman broke into a chuckle. "Thought I was drowned, eh, Tom?"

Tom could not speak, his eyes were big with amazement.

"I won out safe, thanks to Dubois here," said Saxon quickly. "Tell you all about it later. Where's Lomax?"

"Don't know," replied Tom in a hoarse whisper. "Think a tree fell on him."

"By George, there's one down just above. Go and look, Dubois."

Dubois obeyed. A minute later he came back. His face was rather white. "Zat man vill trouble you not again," he said in his quaint accent.

"The tree got him?"

"Ze tree broke 'is back. Ee is vair dead."

"It'd be a lie to say I'm sorry," remarked Saxon. "Tom, are you fit to walk yet?"

Tom declared that he was. But when he got up he was so weak and giddy that, but for Saxon's arm, he would promptly have tumbled down again.

"I say, Dubois, sooner we get into night quarters the better," said Saxon. "Tom's badly crocked, and I'm no great shakes myself."

"Ve vill find ze cabin," declared Dubois resolutely, and once more they faced the hill.

Tom was very weak. The others had to help him up the hill. When at last they had scrambled up the last steep pitch in face of the howling storm, they were all pretty well done.

"Thank goodness, we're at the top," muttered Saxon,

leaning against a tree. "Now, Dubois, where's your dug-out?"

"I sink not far," was the reply. "See, ze ground falls again over zaire."

Presently they were on the edge of a sharp slope. Before them was a deep cleft in the flat hill-top.

It seemed as if in some long-past age a mighty earthquake had split the mountain and left this gaping chasm cutting half-way across its summit.

"Zey said it vas in one valley," said Dubois, peering over. "I sink zis must be ze place."

"All right, then. Down we go. You first, Dubois, and keep a bright look out. Remember we're in the enemy's country."

"Don't look to me as if anyone had been here since the world was made," remarked Tom, staring round with wonder.

In the fast waning light the place had a gloomy, savage appearance. Great jagged rocks projected from the steep cliff-like sides, and patches of still unmelted snow gleamed, ghost-like, among the scattered ragged fir-trees which clothed its sides like bristles on a hog's back.

Overhead the fierce gale roared, while the air at this great elevation was bitterly cold.

Up at the far end the chasm walls drew together till they met at a sharp angle. Here was a great cliff, sheer and black and bare.

At its foot was a litter of rocks piled high as a two-story house. The huge fragments had fallen from above, and were partly covered with earth, over which turf had formed, so that they made a gentle slope, leading perhaps a quarter of the way up the cliff.

Right in the front of this slope was a small oblong opening partly closed by some rough-hewn planking.

The moment Dubois set eyes on this he turned to the others with a gesture of triumph. "Zere is ze dug-out."

"That!" exclaimed Tom in amazement.

"Aye," said Saxon; "made long ago by some miner prospecting for minerals. It's what we call a dug-out. You dig a square hole in a bank, cover it in with logs and sods of earth, make a door, and a chimney, and there you are, snug as heart can desire. Perfectly cold- and wind-proof, and the more snow falls the warmer it keeps you."

Dubois went along to explore.

A moment later he was out and beckoning to them.

"It ees all empty," he said, as they came up. "But vair damp and cold. Ve must 'ave ze beeg fire."

In a moment the lively little man was off with his axe, and splinters began to fly from a near-by log.

It was very dark inside, and the close air struck a bitter chill.

But in a very few minutes a heap of resinous splinters was ablaze on the great open hearth, and flames and smoke rushing up the huge, open wattled chimney.

Dubois brought in armfuls of wood, and Saxon went for water and bedding. The latter was great bundles of springy fir branches.

Tom, lying flat on a couch of these, basked in the warm glow and looked round in wonder at the queer abode.

The front was built of stones and earth. The sides were earth through which big boulders protruded, the back was nearly all rock, loose, shaly stuff, seamed with deep cracks and crevices.

Dubois' haversack provided supper. He explained that the two police, Kelly and Ryder, had both gone back to the fort for help, but before doing so had made him take nearly all their food supplies. So the three had enough to last them for a couple of days.

Supper dispatched, Saxon looked out. It was blowing harder than ever. The sound of the gale in the cliff-top trees was one steady, tremendous thunder.

"There'll be no one about to-night," he said decidedly as he came back. "We can sleep in safety."

"Well, goodness knows, we need it," remarked Dubois.

They made up the fire with huge logs, and in less than three minutes all of them, dog-tired with the toils of the last forty-eight hours, were deep in dreamless sleep.

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What woke Tom was a cold touch on his wrist. He was too tired to move, but he opened his eyes.

The fire had died to a crimson glow, and the place was warm as a hot-house.

What had touched him? Tom could not imagine.

A log burnt through, dropped, sending up a crackle of scarlet sparks. A small flame burst and lit the room with a flickering light which danced upon the earthen walls and the damp-stained timbers of the heavy roof.

Ha, what was that? The crackle of the fire was followed by a dry rustling sound which sounded close to his head. A curious odour resembling cut cucumber came to his nostrils.

With a sudden spasm of fright Tom glanced round. What he saw paralysed him with terror. His blood ran cold and his hair bristled on his scalp.

A huge snake lay coiled upon the earthen floor not a yard from his head. The firelight played upon a flat, triangular head, and was reflected in two cold eyes which shone with the green gleam of the emerald.

This was not all. Beyond was a second snake, not coiled, but moving slowly across the floor. It was fully five feet long. It was this that had, in passing, touched his wrist with its scaly skin.

Further out were still others. Tom counted five in all.

Suddenly one in moving met another. At the touch it coiled angrily. Instantly the silence of the hut was broken by a sharp sound which resembled the whirring of a giant grasshopper.

Cold sweat broke out on Tom's forehead as he realised that the place was full of rattlesnakes.

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For a long minute Tom was beyond power of thought. Panic gripped him. He lay frozen, unable to think or speak, or move, while the deadly reptiles rustled slowly to and fro across the clay floor of the dug-out.

By degrees Tom got control of himself. But for the very life of him he could not imagine what was best to do.

Little as he knew of snakes, he was perfectly certain that his slightest movement meant death. The great reptile that was coiled so close to his head was within easy striking distance.

At Berrymead, far away in old England, Tom had sometimes found adders on the shaly bank of a disused quarry. He knew how deadly rapid was their strike, and knew, too, that the rattlesnake is an adder of great size and far more terrible venom.

Without moving his head he glanced at his companions. Both were still sleeping peacefully, quite unaware of the deadly peril which menaced them.

Tom was afraid to call out. He felt sure that the very least sound or motion on his part would cause the snake to strike, and mean a horrible, agonising death.

Tom was lying on the inner side of the fire, the side furthest from the door. Dubois was opposite, and Saxon between the two.

Saxon lay on his side, breathing regularly. Little Dubois was on his back, snoring peacefully.

The big snake was coiled a little in front of Tom, its head about a yard from his face. It was well out of striking distance from Saxon. It lay absolutely motionless, its triangular head lying flat on its heavy, glistening coils, its cold green eyes fixed unwinkingly on the boy. The only sign of life about it was that now and then its forked tongue flickered out from between its deadly jaws.

How Tom longed that Saxon might wake! He concentrated all his thoughts in a fierce effort to make the sleeping man realise the horrible danger which threatened them both.

Seconds grew to minutes. Nothing happened except that one of the other snakes glided a little nearer to the fire.

Tom felt that he could not stand the strain much longer. An insane desire to spring up and make a dash for the door grew upon him, till he could hardly resist it.

Suddenly Saxon's eyes opened. In a single second the frontiersman saw and comprehended the situation. Tom saw his hand steal to his side.

"Keep absolutely quiet," he said in a penetrating whisper. "I'm going to shoot. First I must call Dubois."

He reached across and touched Dubois, who sat up with the instant watchfulness of men whose lives are cast in dangerous places.

Then Saxon raised his pistol.

As long as Tom Holt lives that scene is graven on his memory. Saxon, cold, collected, hand steady as a rock, his blue eyes glinting; the look of horror on the thin, tanned face of Dubois; the bare, earthen floor, alive with dim, rustling, wreathing shapes; the coiled monster at his elbow. All viewed in the uncertain dancing glow of the flickering log flames.

Tom fully realised the difficulty of a shot under such circumstances. Though the distance was small the light was wretched. And failure meant death.

Slowly Saxon's second finger tightened on the trigger. Crash! The report was deafening in the confined space. Tom was conscious of a wild thrashing on the floor beside him. The serpent, its head smashed to atoms, was writhing in its death agony.

Instantly followed a fierce hissing and rattling. That curious cucumberlike smell which is characteristic of the rattle-snake increased to suffocation.

Tom did not wait. With one bound he was off his pile of fir boughs and dashed for the door.

All three arrived there simultaneously, and together tumbled out into the open.



Slowly Saxon's second finger tightened on the trigger.

See page 172.

"By gol, zat fine shot of yours, Saxon!" exclaimed Dubois in wild excitement.

"A lucky one, you should say, in that light," replied Saxon modestly. "But this is a nice go," he went on. "Evicted in the middle of the night and in this bitter cold and all our kit left behind in the dug-out!"

"Where do they come from?" demanded Tom. "Is this some of Stark's work?"

Saxon laughed. "Hardly! No, the snakes were lying torpid in holes in the rock behind there. It was our fire woke 'em up. They thought summer had come."

"You can shoot them all?" suggested Tom.

"Yes, those in sight. But one can't tell how many more there are in behind."

"Let ze fire out," suggested Dubois. "Zen zey vil freeze."

"Yes, and what shall we do, meanwhile? Freeze too?" smiled Saxon. "No, we'll shoot what we can, and I'll show you how to finish the rest. Tom, chuck a stone into the fire and make it blaze up."

Tom obeyed. The smouldering logs broke into bright flame. The snakes, roused to keener life by the light and heat, glided to and fro, their scales rustling on the dry earthen floor.

Saxon, pistol in hand, took his stand at the door. And then Tom saw as pretty a bit of shooting as heart could desire.

Not a bullet failed to find its billet. At each crashing report a rattler, shot through head or spine, collapsed, writhing. Saxon killed seven, and several more crawled terrified into the far darkness and disappeared into a wide crevice in the rock wall which formed the inner end of the dug-out.

Presently only one was left. It was slightly damaged, having been sharply grazed by a bullet which had already killed another snake.

Saxon looked round, found a forked stick, and, re-entering the hut, walked coolly up to the snake, and, with a lightning-quick motion, pinned its head to the ground.

"Tom, ever made a fizzing devil?" he asked.

"Many a time—to take wasps' nests," grinned Tom.

"Scoop the powder out of a dozen cartridges and make one now. But hardly wet it at all."

"I have ze fuse," broke in Dubois eagerly, and produced a grey, cordlike coil.

Tom did his job in quick and workmanlike style, and Saxon, taking the little packet from him, and giving him the stick to hold carefully, tied the explosive to the snake's rattle. He then slipped his hand up the snake's body and gripped the reptile tight round the neck.

"Can't touch you if you hold him like this," he remarked.

He picked up the snake, and put its head into the crevice, where the rest had disappeared.

"Tom, light the fuse!"

Tom did so, Saxon released the snake, which instantly glided away into the darksome depths.

"Now, wait a moment," said Saxon, with a grim chuckle.

In something less than half a minute there was a dull, heavy thud, and the solid floor shook beneath their feet. A little smoke came oozing back out of the clefts.

"That's settled their hash," remarked Saxon. "All the same, we'll keep a watch the rest of the night. We ought to have done so before. I'll take first hour."

In spite of the excitement, less than ten minutes later Tom was dead asleep again.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SIGNS BY THE BROOK

"HERE's luck!" cried Saxon. "One of their horses has gone lame. It's Fulton's, Tom. Here are his tracks where he got off to look."

It was ten o'clock the next morning, and for four hours the little party had been hot on the trail of Fulton and Mr. Holt. They had decided not to wait for the troopers, who could hardly be expected back for another twenty-four hours, but to make a final attempt to catch up with Tom's father before Fulton lured him into the unknown recesses of the Roost.

"Then we may catch 'em before they get to the Roost!" Tom's eyes were shining. His excitement was intense.

"Don't build on it, lad," replied Saxon kindly. "They've a long start. We haven't yet reached their last night's camp. Still, the accident gives us a chance."

"It ees vair bad country zat we 'ave to cross," remarked Dubois.

It was. These wild hills were virgin forest. The soil was too poor to tempt farmers, and though the timber was fine it lay too far from water to make lumbering worth while. The country was full of game. They saw several caribou, numbers of quail, and a black bear, which vanished silently into a tamarack swamp at their approach.

About midday they came across a small brook, where they made a brief halt, and ate a few mouthfuls of their small remaining stock of food.

"If we can only catch them," said Tom, "we shan't have any more bother. We can go straight to Sunk River, can't we, Saxon?"

Saxon and Dubois exchanged glances. Dubois was about to speak, but Saxon silenced him with a gesture. Afterwards he took an opportunity of saying aside, "Don't discourage him, Dubois. The lad's full of pluck."

"But zere is a chance of catching zem," replied the French-Canadian. "Do you not sink zo?"

"Yes, there's a chance," admitted Saxon thoughtfully. "But if we do we've got to get Holt back to Sunk River—remember that!"

"An' zey vill chase us. Ah, I onderstand!"

"Wish to goodness I knew where Stark himself was," said Saxon. "I think he was behind us at Wind River, and he certainly couldn't cross till the ice had gone out. But he has the command of any amount of horse-flesh, and he may be at the Roost or anywhere else by now."

"If 'e is at ze Roost ve shall 'ave trouble," declared Dubois. "Some'ow 'e vill find out zat ve are 'ere."

"He probably will. Our best hope is that the tree smashing up Lomax may upset his calculations."

About four o'clock they came to another brook. Saxon gave an exclamation, and pointed to the ashes of a fire. "They camped here last night," he said.

He began nosing about like a hound seeking for a lost scent. Tom wondered what he was after. All of a sudden he stopped.

"I thought so," he exclaimed. "Look here, Tom."

Tom obeyed. On the bare, peaky bank of the brook were a number of small scratches, which looked as if they had been done with the point of a stick. Tom examined them, but could make nothing of them, except that one looked like some kind of three-legged animal, and the last were two letters. He shook his head.

"Road signs, Tom," said Saxon. "Fulton left them as directions for Lomax. Evidently he had orders to push along

to the Roost with your father as quickly as possible. He expected Lomax to follow with you, and left these marks as guides for him."

"I see—kind of picture writing," exclaimed Tom eagerly.

"Just so."

"You can read it?"

"Yes. It is plain enough. See, an arrow \rightarrow and this mark \neg . That means, 'Going straight to the Roost.'" He turned to Dubois. "The sugar-loaf sign is for the Roost, isn't it?"

"Zat is so!" exclaimed Dubois. "Ze mountain is ze shape of a loaf of sugar."

"Then comes the three-legged animal," cried Tom.

"Eame horse, that means, and see the \neg above it. That means that it is his own, not your father's. If it had been your father's the sign would have been \neg ."

"Next come two circles and a half-circle, $\bigcirc \bigcirc \bigcirc$. What do you make of that?"

"Suns," ventured Tom.

"Exactly!" cried Saxon approvingly. "Two days, and half a day. 'Hope to be there by day after to-morrow, mid-day.' That's the meaning."

"And the last is a straight line with a circle on it," said Tom eagerly, "and two letters, O.K., after it. Does that mean, keep straight on?"

"No," replied Saxon. "I take it to mean that Fulton has seen nothing worth mentioning to report along the track. The last two letters are merely common American slang for 'All correct,' spelt as pronounced, 'Orl korrekt.'"

"Day after to-morrow, midday," said Tom thoughtfully. "They've at least eight hours' start of us. Do you think there's any chance of our catching them?"

"I'll be quite plain with you, Tom. There's just a chance. But not one you can count on. They're all of twenty miles ahead of us, and though they've only got one horse that's a big help. It carries one of them besides all their kit. For

another thing, the country's new to me, and I can't risk tracking after dark."

"We can only try," said Tom simply.

They did try. They covered another ten miles that night before they camped. All next day they drove forward at top speed.

The ground was shocking. In the valleys deep morasses lay along the edge of the swollen creeks. The whole country was a maze of hills and gullies, and thick forests. Once they had to pass through several miles of "*bois brûlés*," burnt woods, where the blackened trunks towered against the blue sky, and the fire had bitten deep into the peaty soil. They were all three black as sweeps when they emerged.

On the third morning they were off again at dawn.

"They can't be more than an hour ahead of us," said Saxon. "These tracks are fresh."

Tom was aching in every limb, but he marched straight ahead. He was possessed with one idea. To catch up with Fulton and his father before they reached Stark's secret retreat.

For two hours they marched up long slopes through heavy timber, and then, without the slightest warning, they were out of the forest and on the edge of a steep descent into a wide, flat, heavily timbered valley.

Exactly opposite rose a great conical mountain. It looked like a gigantic ant-hill, and its top towered at least three thousand feet above the cliffs at its base.

Its steep sides were clothed with shaggy forest except where great scars of bare precipice showed brown through the heavy evergreen foliage. The top, for a distance of five or six hundred feet down, was absolutely bare, a fantastic pinnacle of splintered rock, which looked impregnable to any creature not possessed of wings. A few white blotches of snow clung in the clefts of this unscalable summit, and soft grey clouds blew like smoke across its ragged crest.

The whole mountain had an air of gloom and of almost

terrific grandeur. There was not the slightest sign of life anywhere on the towering sides.

"Zat is ze Roost," said Dubois simply.

Tom gave a gasp. "That's where they're taking Dad," he muttered.

"And there he is, if I'm not mistaken," said Saxon, pointing downwards.

A mile away, half-way across the valley, two men, one mounted, the other walking, had just emerged from a clump of trees. They were making straight for the mountain.

Tom strained his eyes. "Yes, it's Dad!" His voice shook with excitement. "Come on!" He started forward.

Saxon laid a firm hand on his arm. "Steady, lad!"

Tom whirled round. There was anger in his face. "There's not a minute to lose!" he cried.

"Better lose a minute than lose everything. The mountain has eyes, Tom. Do you think Stark keeps no watch? Not one of us must show so much as the top of his hat while we cross the valley."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECRET PASS

"WHAT'S it mean? I saw them a moment ago. Now they're gone!"

Tom spoke in a whisper of extreme amazement.

For the last half-hour he and his two companions had been hurrying from tree to tree through the plain below the mountain. It was back-breaking work, for they had not only to cover nearly double the distance of Fulton's route in order to take advantage of the trees, but also to bend double in order to escape observation from Stark's sentinels on the Roost.

They had made a semicircle, and by a desperate effort had reached a clump of timber not a hundred yards from the base of the towering cliffs which fringed the mountain on every side.

A faintly marked trail ran between the clump and the cliff. Saxon and Dubois were agreed that Fulton would probably take this track in order to reach the mountain. They could not, of course, be certain, for none of them had the faintest idea of the position of the mouth of the pass. That was a secret which Dubois had never learnt. Stark imparted it only to his oldest confederates.

At first it had seemed that Saxon was right in his guess. From their hiding-place, lying close among thickly tangled undergrowth, they had seen Fulton and Mr. Holt approach. Mr. Holt was riding, Fulton was walking, beside the horse.

They had come so near that Tom had actually been able

to distinguish his father's features. Saxon had noticed the boy fairly quivering with excitement. For a moment he had feared he might do something foolish, but Tom kept a tight hold on himself and lay still in his hiding-place.

Suddenly Fulton had taken the bridle and turned the horse's head sharp to the left. The watchers could actually hear him speak, though they could not distinguish the words he used. Horse and man had walked straight to the base of the cliff and disappeared as silently and completely as if the solid rocks had opened and swallowed them up.

It was Dubois who replied to Tom. "Ze mouth of ze secret pass," he said.

There was an odd quiver of excitement in his sharp whisper.

"There's no opening!" retorted Tom.

"There must be," said Saxon. "Evidently it's hidden by a fold or curtain of rock. Fulton knows the secret."

Without another word Tom was scrambling hurriedly to his feet. Saxon's heavy hand fell on his arm and pulled him down.

"Let me go. We shall lose them!" cried Tom, turning fiercely on Saxon and vainly trying to jerk loose. He might as well have tried to release himself from an iron vice.

"Don't be foolish, lad!" returned Saxon kindly. "A false step, and we're done. Move a yard out of cover and Stark's sentinels are dead certain to see you."

"But, Dad'll be gone. I shall never see him again once they get him into that beastly place," cried Tom.

"Yes, you will," said Saxon comfortingly. "We know where the entrance is. Wait till night."

"What! All those hours? They'll kill Dad meanwhile." Tom, quite beside himself, struggled violently.

"Keep still!" bade Saxon sternly. "They won't kill him. They'll do nothing till their master comes. Ten to one Stark's not there yet."

Tom was only half convinced. "You're saying that to

comfort me. Let's make a dash, Saxon," he implored. "We can knock Fulton on the head, take Dad, and clear."

"What, with one horse between four? And a dozen mounted men after us in five minutes?"

Tom gave a groan and subsided.

"I'm awfully sorry for you, Tom," said Saxon. "It's frightfully rough on you. But you must be wise. As soon as it's dark we'll try our luck."

"You vill go up ze pass?" Dubois' olive face was very pale.

"Not you, Dubois. You must stay and keep guard. Tom and I will go."

Aside he said to Tom: "It wouldn't be right to let him go. If they did collar him they'd be apt to do something particularly unpleasant. They say Stark once burnt a spy."

The waiting was terribly tedious. The three hardly dared to move, and they could talk only in whispers. The wind had quite gone down, the stillness was intense and unbroken by any sign of life from the great mountain opposite.

Slowly the shadows lengthened and the air took the chill of evening. The sun dipped below the western mountains, and twilight fell. In the half light the towering cliffs assumed an aspect so grim and repellent that Tom shivered as he gazed up at their gloomy and tremendous crests. It was terrible to think that his father was a prisoner up in those rocky fastnesses, in the hands of the outlaws who dwelt among its caves and peaks.

Dusk deepened to dark. Even then Saxon insisted on waiting till the stars shone frostily in the black vault above, and the last glimmer of daylight had faded from the snowy crests far in the west.

"Now for it!" he said at last, standing up and stretching his great muscular limbs. "Dubois, stay where you are till dawn. If we are not back by then make the best of your way back, meet Kelly and his police, and bring them with you. They should be on our track by now."

“ Vy not you vait for zem now ? ”

“ For one thing we’ve got next to no grub. For another, we don’t want Tom’s father to enjoy Stark’s hospitality one minute longer than necessary.”

Dubois nodded. He shook hands silently with them both. Then Tom and Saxon left him and made for the spot where they had seen Fulton disappear.

Noiselessly they crawled across the thick, tussocky grass, below the towering wall of rock. It was not until they reached the very spot where Fulton and Tom’s father had vanished that they saw the slightest sign of any opening.

Then, behind a narrow curtain or fold of rock which jutted out from the main cliff like the curved tail of a letter S, they found a narrow gap, a cleft not four feet wide, running into the heart of the cliff.

So completely hidden was it by the covering curtain that a stranger might have passed almost within arm’s length of the opening without the slightest suspicion of its existence.

At the entrance to this gloomy crevice Saxon paused. “ Tom,” he said, “ I’ll go first. Keep close. Above all, walk quietly and don’t make a sound. If we meet a sentinel leave him to me.”

Then they started.

The path, Tom soon saw, did not cut straight into the mountain. In a few steps it turned to the right, rising sharply as it went, with walls of bare, black rock on either side. It was a natural cleft in the cliff face, a cleft resembling a deep ditch along the bottom of which a man, or even a horse, could walk with fair ease.

At first Tom looked out sharply for loose stones. There were none. Evidently Stark’s men had cleared the road. “ A blessing,” thought Tom. “ In this still air they’d hear if even one went rolling.”

Yard by yard the two passed slowly upwards. The track zigzagged almost as if it had been cut by hand. But beyond a few places where holes in the road had been roughly mended

and others where rocks seemed to have been blasted away, there was no sign of man's handiwork.

They had been climbing for about five minutes, and had seen no sign of living thing, when Saxon suddenly stopped. In the gloom Tom almost stumbled on top of him.

"Steady, lad. The pass forks here. I haven't a notion which way to go, and I daren't strike a match. Wait a moment."

Strong-hand got down on his hands and knees, and began feeling the rock with his fingers. Tom wondered what on earth he could find by doing thus.

"Tracks both ways," said Saxon, rising. "The horse went to the left. We'll try that."

They had not gone far before a stamping sound came to their ears. Instantly Saxon flattened himself against the rock wall. Tom copied him.

A moment of intense suspense. Then Saxon drew a long breath of relief. "It's their stables, Tom. That was only a horse stamping in its stall. Ah, there it is again!"

"Probably be someone looking after the horses," suggested Tom.

"We shall see them first," replied Saxon significantly.

They turned a bend in the pass, and a dull glow showed in the distance.

"Quietly, Tom!" said Saxon warningly. He stole forward in his usual noiseless manner, and Tom followed.

The path ended suddenly in a cave mouth, a mouth about the size of an ordinary barn door, and just inside there hung from a hook in the roof a common stable lantern. It struck Tom as odd to see such a very ordinary utensil in such surroundings.

Beyond were stalls built of rough-hewn lumber. Tom could see half a dozen horses, and there seemed to be more in the distance. Saddles and bridles hung on pegs, and a rough-looking man in his shirt-sleeves was sitting on an

upturned bucket smoking a pipe and sewing a broken strap. A Winchester rifle leant against the wall near by.

Saxon drew Tom back a little. "I don't believe this is the real Roost," he whispered. "It's only their stables. We'd better try the other path."

As silently as they had come they stole back, and presently were climbing the right-hand fork of the pass.

Up and up, with the bare black walls pressing on either elbow. The ascent was steeper now. In places so steep that steps had been cut in the living rock, and once a rude wooden ladder gave means of climbing a ten-foot perpendicular wall.

"What a place to hold against an attacking party!" muttered Saxon. "Take that ladder away, put a few fellows to roll rocks over the top there, and ten men might defy an army. I've heard of the Roost often enough, but this is amazing."

They were not yet at the end of the natural defences of Stark's mountain eyrie. There came to their ears the bubbling rush of falling water, and suddenly their path was cut by a narrow gorge spanned by a wooden footbridge. Below, in the unseen depths, a torrent roared hoarsely.

"We're above the cliffs," whispered Saxon after a while. "See, there are trees!"

But the path did not ascend to the surface. It still wound upwards through this strange series of deep clefts in the mountain side.

They had been climbing for more than half an hour when, turning a sharp corner, the thick darkness was illuminated by a rich crimson glow.

It shone out from a huge gap in the left-hand wall of the pass, and flung a ruddy light on the opposite rocks. Its appearance was that of a great furnace door flung open in the dark hold of a liner. Tom had just time to see that two men, rifles in hand, cartridge-belts at waist, lounged at the cavern mouth, their dark figures silhouetted against

the red glare. Then Saxon's heavy hand pressed him to the ground.

"The Roost at last!" thought Tom, his heart throbbing thickly.

He did not dare speak, hardly breathe. Saxon beside him lay motionless as a stone.

So they lay for many minutes, not daring to exchange a word, or move a finger.

One of the sentries strolled carelessly into the cave and disappeared, the other, slinging his rifle over his shoulder, suddenly turned and came walking down the pass towards them.

For a moment Tom believed he had seen them. Then he remembered that this was impossible. They were in the dark, the sentry in the light.

But the man was coming straight towards them. That was as bad. If he reached the spot where they lay he must literally stumble over them. The path was not a yard and a half wide.

Worse, there was no way of escape, for the rock walls on either side were far too steep and high to climb.

"What shall we do?" he whispered anxiously in Saxon's ear.

"Keep still!" returned Saxon sternly.

As the sentry approached, Tom felt Saxon stiffen all over like a cat about to spring.

Utterly unconscious of the danger which lurked in his path, the sentry came strolling casually along, humming an air under his breath. Tom could not see his face, but his tall figure was clear as a shadowgraph against the red glow which poured from the cave mouth.

It was not till the man had almost trodden upon them that Saxon sprang.

Never had Tom believed that any human being was capable of such a feat. The sentry had not even time to begin a cry before Saxon's iron fingers clutched his throat, and Saxon's right leg caught him behind the knees.

Down he fell like one struck by lightning, and as he lay flat upon the rocks Saxon gagged and bound him with amazing speed and certainty.

So complete was the surprise that the man made no visible effort at resistance, and of sound there was nothing that could have been heard at fifty feet. Within half a minute he was helpless as a log.

No sooner was the last knot tied than Saxon sprang to his feet. "Now!" he whispered crisply, and pointed to the unprotected door of the cavern.

Tom was up in an instant. But Saxon, instead of moving forward, dropped his hand sharply upon Tom's arm.

"Listen!" he muttered.

Tom listened. For a moment he could hear nothing at all except the dull crackle of the fire in the cave, and a low hum of voices from its interior.

"Put your ear to the ground," whispered Saxon.

The boy obeyed. "Click, click!" Iron on stone, the sounds came faint but clear through the virgin rock.

He sprang to his feet again.

"Footsteps?"

"Aye," said Saxon grimly. "Coming up the pass from below. Lad, we're in a tight place."

CHAPTER XX

AT THE LADDER-HEAD

SAXON was right. A tighter place than that in which he and Tom Holt found themselves could hardly have been conceived.

Both utterly alone in a deep rocky cleft high up on the face of the wild mountain. In front, the great cave with the crimson glare streaming from its tunnel-like mouth ; behind them, more of the robber band—three at least, judging by the sound of the footsteps which rang sharply on the floor of the rocky pass and were carried clearly to their ears through the sharp stillness of the spring night—were coming swiftly up the mountain-side.

To all appearances they were caught like rats in a trap.

“Can’t we manage to climb up out of the pass?” asked Tom quickly. “We could hide in the trees above, and wait till these others were past and safe in the cave.”

Saxon glanced at the sheer walls on either side. The black wet rock glistened faintly in the dim starlight which fell through the narrow cleft high overhead.

“Not without wings,” he answered grimly. “And, if we could, what about this?”—pointing to the sentinel who lay tied and gagged upon the ground. “They’re bound to miss him soon, and then we’ll have the whole hornets’ nest about our ears.”

“But you’re not going back now we’re so near?” implored Tom.

“Go back! We can’t!” Tom thought he caught the

suspicion of a chuckle in Saxon's voice. "Ten to one it's Stark himself who's behind us. Here, we've no time to lose. Help me pick up this chap."

Tom had not the faintest idea what Saxon was after, or what plan he had in his head. But he did not hesitate an instant. His confidence in the scout was complete.

As he stooped to take the sentinel's heels another man appeared at the cave mouth, his figure black against the glare of crimson light. "Rube!" he shouted. "Rube!"

"Missed him already," muttered Saxon. "Quick as you can, Tom! There's not a moment to lose. Those chaps below are coming up smart."

Down hill they travelled, the sentinel's helpless body swinging loosely between them. A hundred yards, and they came to a deep cleft in the right-hand wall of the pass. "This'll do, Tom," said Saxon. "Tuck him in here. All right, friend Rube"—this to the man himself—"you be still and take it easy. You'll find it a bit cold, but I can't help that. I'll send someone to look after you when we've finished our business."

"Take his rifle, Tom," went on Saxon quickly. "It'll come in handy."

"Why not hide in here and jump out at them when they come by?" Tom ventured to suggest.

"Not a bad notion, but too risky. Can't tackle three at once in a place like this without a scrap. And they'd hear a shout or a shot up at the cave. The ladder's the place, if we can only get there first."

"But the bridge is nearer," said Tom.

"Yes, but we've got to secure our own retreat. If we bust up the bridge we can't get back."

"What an ass I am!" muttered Tom ruefully as he ran swiftly but silently by Saxon's side down the long, steep slope.

They crossed the bridge, rounded the sharp angle in the pass beyond, and flung themselves down breathlessly at the top of the rock ledge by the ladder.

Those whom they had come to meet were very near. Their steps rang sharply on the rock floor of the pass. There were certainly three of them.

"Shift the ladder?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

Tom took hold. "Bad luck, it's fast!" he whispered. "Staples driven into the rock."

"Quick, give me hold!"

Saxon knelt at the top of the ladder. He put forth all his gigantic strength. For a moment he strained fiercely without result. Then there was a slight crunching sound. Small fragments of rock dropped lightly to the ground below. Saxon, unaided, had forced the great four-inch iron staples from their rock bed. The ladder was loose.

Saxon lifted it a few inches to see it was loose, then replaced it.

"Not going to pull it up?" inquired Tom, amazed.

"No, not yet. I'm going to let the first man come right up. When I catch him you collar him. Put your rifle to his head if you like, but don't shoot unless you have to. I'll attend to the others. Meanwhile lie flat."

Tom's heart beat like a sledge-hammer. So loudly that he fancied those coming must hear it. It was excitement pure and simple. There was not one atom of funk in Tom's make-up.

Next moment the first man had reached the ladder and was coming up it with the swift silence of a trained athlete.

Was it Stark? It was too dark to see his face, but something in that long, lean, athletic form was familiar to Tom.

Saxon let him reach the top before he moved. The man was in the act of putting a leg over on to the ledge when out shot an arm like a bar of chilled steel and the climber was plucked from his hold and flung forward upon his face. His head struck bare rock with a dull thud, and before he could move, or even cry out, Tom was on top of him, and his strong brown fingers clutching at his throat.



One swift downward stroke and the heavy butt of Saxon's revolver came square on the man's head.

See page 195.

"Hurt yourself, Mr. Stark?" came a voice from below. It was the second man who spoke, he was half-way up the ladder.

So it was Stark! Tom could have yelled with pure delight.

"The boss has took a tumble," the fellow called back to the one below.

"'Tain't no use telling me," returned the other truculently. "Go on and help him up."

Number Two clambered rapidly up. Saxon let him get on the top rung but one, then served him exactly as he had served Stark. Perhaps he used a trifle more force. Anyhow, the fellow lay still where he had fallen.

The third man paused. "Clumsy ifiot!" he grumbled. "Hank, I say, Hank, can't ye keep your pins neither?"

Saxon and Tom lay still as mice. Tom hardly breathed. Had this fellow seen anything? Would he spoil it all?

"Wonder ef there's any hanky-panky bizness about it," growled the man doubtfully. As he spoke he pulled something from his hip pocket. Saxon, who was nearest the ledge, saw the starlight glint dully on the barrel of a heavy pistol.

"Have to settle him before he gets to close quarters," he thought to himself, and grasped his own pistol by the barrel.

Slowly and cautiously Number Three made his way up the ladder. Half-way up he paused. "Hank!" he cried again. "Hank, I say! What in creation's took the chap?"

"Be you there, Mr. Stark?" he continued, taking another step.

This brought him within Saxon's reach. One swift downward stroke and the heavy butt of Saxon's revolver came square on the man's head. He flung up his hands and dropped with a crash to the rock below.

"Pity!" said Saxon. "But I had to do it."

Tom hardly heard. "Got 'em all!" he cried enthusiastically.

"Well, don't let 'em get away this time," remarked Saxon drily.

"Stark won't anyhow," retorted Tom.

Saxon struck a match, shading it with his hand. There was no danger of being seen from above, for there were many turns in the pass. He held it over Tom's prisoner.

"Stark's right enough"; there was deep satisfaction in his voice. "No, I reckon he won't get away," he said with a dry chuckle. "You've made sure of him this time, Tom."

"Yes," said the man on the ground. "Your young friend has evidently a high opinion of my value. He's trussed me up like a registered parcel."

Tom started. He had not known that Stark had recovered consciousness. By the flickering light of the match he saw the man's deep-set eyes fixed upon Saxon and himself with a curious expression. An expression very difficult to fathom. Possibly alarm—certainly annoyance, but Tom fancied there was a touch of amusement in it as well.

The boy gave an involuntary shudder. There was something vaguely terrifying in Stark's face. He realised instantly that here was no ordinary bandit. This man was a plotter and schemer of a very uncommon calibre. The sort who might have risen to great things if his enormous energies of mind and body had been directed into proper channels.

But through some curious trick in his nature he had elected to turn them against all law and order. And long years spent in plotting and crime had left an indelible impress on the strong features.

The match flame flickered and died. Stark spoke again.

"Now you've got me, perhaps you'll be kind enough to tell me the reason why you've seen fit to trespass on my property, knock my friends on the head, and make a prisoner of myself in this totally unwarranted manner."

Saxon finished cording the second man. The third was beyond power to harm for the present.

He laughed. "Tom, Mr. Stark wants to know why you've tied him up so tight."

"Because you've kidnapped my father, and I want him

back." Tom's reasons were given with sledge-hammer directness.

"And who are you?" inquired Stark.

"You ought to know. You've seen me before. I am Tom Holt."

"John Holt's son. I thought so. But you are entirely mistaken. I have not kidnapped your father."

"You mean to say he is not up in your cave above here at the present minute?" Tom's voice rang with surprise and anger.

"Not at all," replied Stark coolly. "To the best of my belief he is either eating his supper or is sound asleep in an apartment of my underground residence at the present moment."

Tom could find no words to express his amazement.

"Mr. Holt came out from England with friends of mine, and they brought him here for a rest on his way to his property at Sunk River. He is my guest for a few days."

"Guest—prisoner you mean!" retorted Tom scornfully.

"Nothing of the sort," replied Stark calmly. "If you don't believe me come and see for yourself."

Saxon broke in with a laugh. "Thank you, Mr. Stark. We are not anxious to emulate the fly in the fable. The spider's parlour might not prove precisely a health resort."

"I give you my word, if your father wants to leave he can go at any minute he likes. No one will do anything to prevent him."

Tom turned swiftly to Saxon. "Father must have signed the deed of sale already," he muttered sharply.

"Come now, Mr. Stark," said Saxon. "This sort of bluff is hardly worthy of you. You'd best acknowledge yourself beaten for once, and hand over Mr. Holt without further trouble. If you don't, I warn you we shall take you back to Fort Victoria and give you over to Colonel Westcott on a charge of kidnapping."

Stark laughed. "Do so by all means. I'm perfectly

willing. Then you'll only have to send back here for the boy's father as a witness against me. And I warn you that neither you nor anyone else can prove a thing."

Tom drew Saxon aside. "For my sake, let's get hold of father at once. We don't know what those brutes may be doing to him. Now we've got Stark surely we can make an exchange."

"To say the truth, that was my original idea, Tom. But you see the difficulties. The risk is very great. To get him we are bound to visit the Roost, and then goodness knows what tricks this smooth scoundrel will be up to."

"He can't do much if we keep a pistol to his head all the time," urged Tom. He spoke strongly, and Saxon saw that the boy, who was deeply attached to his father, was miserable at the prospect of delay.

Something in the idea appealed to his own adventurous spirit. To carry through a bluff like this, to beard the Terror of the North-West in his own cave, to carry off his prisoner under Stark's own nose, would be a feat worth remembering.

He swung round again to where Stark lay.

"My young friend suggests that we exchange you for his father. Are you willing?"

"Perfectly," returned Stark in his curious, deep voice.

"Here are my terms," said Saxon curtly. "You accompany us to the cave. When Mr. Holt is released you come back with us down the pass. You supply us with four horses from your stable, to be chosen by ourselves. And you are to ride with us for the first ten miles. I need hardly say that your hands must be tied and that I shall keep a pistol fairly close to your head."

"Needs must when—but I won't be impolite, Mr. Saxon. I assure you it's much ado about nothing. But there—you won't believe me. Yes, I accept your suggestion."

"That's good," said Saxon. "And I'd have you remember, Mr. Stark, that at the first sign of treachery Robbers' Roost will be without its chief."

CHAPTER XXI

BEARDING THE LION

COMING straight from the black darkness of the walled pass, the red glare dazzled Tom. For a moment he was conscious of nothing but the intense blaze, and of a terrific clanging which he had already heard a long way down the pass.

When he recovered the full use of his eyes he found himself in the mouth of an enormous cavern, the arched roof of which towered like that of a mighty cathedral aisle to a height of seventy or eighty feet above his head.

Right in front, in the very centre of the floor of the cave, was a blacksmith's forge, around which several men were busily employed.

One worked the bellows, another stirred the fire, from which a gush of furious flame rushed upwards, flinging clouds of sparks high into the smoky air. Two more had a bar of white-hot metal on an anvil and were pounding and hammering. The ringing sound of the heavy blows reverberated from the lofty roof and the distant walls with an echoing clamour beyond anything that the young Briton had ever before heard in his life.

But it was not so much the forge, nor the men around it, nor the numerous other figures dimly seen through the haze of ruddy smoke which chiefly attracted Tom's attention.

It was the glorious—almost unspeakable beauties of the cave itself. The whole of the limestone roof was one bewildering mass of enormous stalactites.

These were of such length that in places they reached and

met the stalagmites which had grown upwards from the floor, and made magnificent pillars of exquisitely graceful shapes.

The distant walls were likewise coated with great sheets and curtains of semi-transparent spar, and the play of light among these seemingly endless aisles of pillars and fantastically shaped drapings simply defied description. Every shade from palest pink through rose and scarlet to vivid crimson was reflected from the marvellous natural carvings.

To Tom's bewildered eyes it seemed as though the whole of the enormous stretches of roof and wall had been set with precious stones of unthinkable size and exquisite transparency.

A gasp of mingled amazement and delight escaped him, and at that moment, if anyone had attacked him, the boy would have been unable to offer the slightest resistance.

The three had hardly stepped inside the cavern mouth when abruptly the pounding of the sledge-hammer ceased, the hum of many voices died away, and the tremendous din was succeeded by a silence so intense as to be almost uncanny.

Now for the first time Tom took note of the men who were scattered over the great level floor of the cavern. Some, in spite of the din, had been sleeping, some had been playing cards, others had been cooking at small fires.

Their number amazed him.

There must have been at least a hundred in sight.

Now they were all on their feet, and every eye was directed to their leader and the two intrepid adventurers who held him prisoner in his own retreat and in face of his army of followers.

Scores of fierce faces fronted Tom in every direction. There were big fair-bearded Norsemen, hatchet-faced, keen-eyed Yankees, bronzed Western plainsmen, and Mexicans, lithe, swarthy, and wearing the silver-crusted hats and straps and scarlet sashes in which the Spanish-American delights.

One and all glared at Tom and Saxon, some in sheer wonderment, but the majority with open hostility.

Tom for the first time felt a stab of something like fear. Surely it had been madness to face this savage crew in their mountain fastness! It would have been better to wait till they could have obtained help from the police at Fort Victoria.

Yet after all, what could the police do? As Saxon had said, ten men could have held an army at bay at the ladder or the bridge. No, if his father were to be rescued at all, this bluff was the only hope of carrying the rescue through.

He glanced at Saxon. The big frontiersman's bronzed face was as calm as if he had been entering a lady's drawing-room. There was not the slightest trace of emotion of any kind except that the tight-set lips gave token of indomitable resolution.

There was such force about the man that the boy took comfort.

"Stark's at our mercy. What can they do?" he thought, and faced the angry band with steady eyes.

Suddenly, from behind a great pillar of luminous crimson spar, stepped out a figure so startling, so menacing, that Tom half stopped and his fingers tightened on his rifle stock.

To the waist the man was a giant, but his legs, though massive and enormously muscular, were short and so outward bowed that the creature waddled like a duck.

The head was enormous and hideous beyond words. A snub nose, a huge mouth set with jagged teeth, big protruding ears, small fiery eyes matched with enormously heavy eyebrows made up a face which was revolting in its ugliness.

To add, if that were possible, to its hideousness the hair on head and face alike appeared to have been run over by a pair of sheep clippers, leaving a black stubble about a quarter of an inch in length.

The creature was dressed in a pair of blue dungaree trousers and a flannel shirt laced up the front. His sleeves were turned up, showing arms of vast girth on which the mighty

muscles rose and fell in huge knots. Shoes he had none, and his flat feet ended in toes as long and flexible as most men's fingers.

But the worst of him all was his eyes. Small and deep-set, they reflected the firelight like those of a wild beast, and they further resembled those of a wolf in that they gleamed with a savagery such as Tom had never before imagined in the face of a human being.

This repulsive apparition waddled up to the new-comers and confronted them. He glared at Saxon, and shook an enormous hairy fist.

"Shall I kill him, boss?" he growled, and his voice was like the mutter of distant thunder.

Stark smiled. "Best not try, Jabe. Might be awkward for me. Don't you see he's got a gun?"

He turned slightly towards Saxon. "Don't mind my watch-dog," he whispered, and nodded his head significantly. "Like a dog, he's faithful, and growls when he thinks violence is offered to his master."

Jabe, as Stark had called him, was staring at Saxon.

"Looks real strong," he said. "Give him to me, boss. Gar, how I'd love to find a chap ez cud stand up ter me fer a minute, ay or half a minute. Put us in the pit, boss, an' let's scrap. These fellers"—and he waved his great paw contemptuously towards the rest who were gathered in a wide, wondering semicircle—"they ain't no good. Skeered o' me—every last one o' them."

Stark frowned. "Shut up, Jabe," he ordered harshly. "Get back to your place. When I want you, I'll call for you."

For a moment Jabe did not obey. He was glaring at Saxon.

Saxon, still holding the cord which bound Stark's wrists in one hand and his pistol firmly in the other, bent those piercing grey-blue eyes of his upon the hideous dwarf.

A moment of silent conflict. Then, wild beast like, Jabe could no longer face the steady gaze. He turned away with

a snarl, and slunk out of sight behind the vast pillar from which he had emerged.

"Graves, where is Mr. Holt?" asked Stark of a brawny ruffian who stood near, evidently lost in wonderment at the whole proceedings.

"The gent as come evening?"

"Yes," impatiently.

"He's in number three, boss."

"That's further in," remarked Stark to his jailers. "Kindly follow me." His manners were the very pink of politeness, but this only made Tom more vigilant. He kept step for step with Saxon, his rifle cocked and ready, with a wary eye on Stark's followers, who were now muttering dangerously among themselves.

But though they muttered they did not move. There was that in Saxon's face which warned them without words that any attack on their part would mean the instant death of their leader, and probably of a good many others into the bargain.

Without a doubt most of them knew Strong-hand Saxon by sight, and knew his character well enough to be well aware what would be the result of any aggression.

With the coil that bound Stark's wrist firmly twisted round his own, and barely a foot of slack between them, Saxon followed grimly in the other's footsteps.

They passed straight down the central aisle, their feet moving soundlessly on the sand which covered the floor, and, leaving the men of Stark's band behind, entered a wide, lofty passage, which ran straight and deep into the heart of the hill.

Passage, like cave, was a mass of exquisite stalactites, and so were the branching corridors which ran away at various angles on either side.

It struck Tom with a momentary sense of wonder how anyone could remain a criminal among such marvellous beauties of Nature.

There was no need to carry lanterns. All was light as day ; and Tom, wondering at the cause of the amazing illumination, was staggered to see that powerful arc lamps hung high up among the pillars and traceries of the arching roof. It was one more sign of the wealth and resources of this robber baron, and a very startling one.

How did they get the power, he wondered. And presently he was answered ; for, as the passage dropped downhill, there came to his ears, from somewhere far in the distance, the rush and gurgle of falling water, and the purring hum of a dynamo. Without doubt an underground river, the same, perhaps, which they had crossed on the way up the pass.

Here and there in the walls of the great rock corridor were doors which seemed to give access to passages or chambers which had been walled in as storehouses or living-rooms. There was nothing rough about these doors. They were of fine pitch-pine, beautifully grained.

Some bore names. Tom noticed "Larder," "Magazine," "Wood Store."

Beyond these the doors were numbered.

Tom marvelled at these evidences of civilisation in this unknown mountain cavern in the heart of the wilderness.

Stark seemed to divine his thoughts.

"This is my home," he said, "and has been for many years. I am proud of it, and I make it as habitable as is possible with such resources as are in my power."

They passed two numbered doors, and arrived at the one which bore the numeral "3" neatly painted in black in the centre of the upper panel.

"I think this is where we shall find Mr. Holt," said Stark. His tone was as cool and collected as if he had been showing honoured guests into his library, instead of being forced at pistol point to render up the secrets of his prison house.

Tom felt a momentary pang of shame. Perhaps, after all, Stark was not such a ruffian as he had been led to believe. Could it be possible that this handsome, smartly dressed

man, with his exquisite manners and high-bred voice, was the kidnapping ruffian who was trying to swindle him and his father out of their Sunk River property ?

Then he remembered his usage at the hands of Snell and Wiley, Fulton and Lomax, and Ike Foxley's cowardly attempt on Saxon's life. He hardened his heart, and braced himself against softer feelings.

Saxon's voice broke in sharp and uncompromising. "Is the door locked ?"

Stark smiled. "No. Why should it be ? I wish I could disabuse your minds of the idea that Mr. Holt is my prisoner."

"Open the door, Tom. Then stand aside."

Tom realised that Saxon was suspicious. But for the life of him he could not see any reason. Stark, and his followers as well, knew perfectly well that at the first sign of treachery the nickel-pointed bullet from Saxon's revolver would plough its way through his prisoner's brain.

The brass knob turned easily, and the heavy door swung back noiselessly on well-oiled hinges.

Once more Tom fairly gasped with the surprise of what he saw before him.

Here was a room that a millionaire might have envied. The floor of beautiful wood, set parquet fashion, was strewn with splendid bear, wolf, and panther skins. The furniture was heavy and splendid, and the room, like the corridor outside, was brilliantly lit by electric lamps set in the walls and ceiling.

A great glass-fronted bookcase was full of handsomely bound volumes. The walls were hung with tapestry, and the ceiling was of highly polished timber.

Every appointment was perfect, from the wood fire which burnt clearly in a great open hearth, to the ivory knobs of the electric bells. There was absolutely no suggestion of cave. The room, with all it contained, might have been transported bodily from one of the great mansions in Park Lane.

But it was not the room and its splendours that made most impression upon Tom. On the far side of the fire was a deep arm-chair covered with a white sheepskin, and in it, lying back with his eyes closed, seemingly sound asleep, was Mr. John Holt, late of Berrymead Farm.

At sight of his father at last within his reach, Tom forgot everything else, and, utterly oblivious of Saxon's command to stand aside, was bounding forward with a cry of joy.

"Steady!" came Saxon's voice, sharp and crisp, and Tom stopped on the very threshold.

"Kindly go first," said Saxon to Stark; and Stark, with a half-turn and a little bow to the others, took a long step forward into the room.

Saxon followed. As he did so, Tom saw his arms jerk suddenly upwards above his head, while he reeled helplessly forward.

His pistol went off with a crash. At the same instant out went the lights with a snap, leaving the whole place in pitchy darkness.

For one instant Tom stood dumbfounded. Then, with a hoarse cry of rage, he flung himself forward.

He felt a terrific shock, which seemed to lift him bodily from the floor. Then he fell forward and knew no more.

CHAPTER XXII

TOM REFUSES TO SIGN

THERE was a dull roaring in Tom's ears when he woke to life again. The darkness was utter, and for a few moments the boy could not, for the very life of him, imagine what had happened. He tried to move, and found that his legs were ironed. His hands were free, and he stretched them out.

He was lying on a bed of straw, but on each side his groping fingers encountered cold, damp rock. The air was cold and raw, and the roar resolved itself into the rush of water.

"Tom, are you there?" came a weak voice from the gloom.

"You, Saxon?"

"Yes, here beside you."

"Where are we?"

"Don't know for certain. Some underground dungeon of Stark's."

Recollections flashed back upon Tom. "I remember. We were just going into the room where father was when I saw you jump up into the air, and your pistol go off. Then all the lights went out. I made a rush at Stark, and something hit me, and down I went. What was it? What happened?"

"Plain enough," replied Saxon bitterly. "There was a plate of metal just inside the door highly charged with electricity. When I stepped on it I got a shock which knocked me out. What a fool I was! I saw Stark make a long step, and never suspected. I shall never forgive myself."

Tom was alarmed to hear Saxon talk like this. It was something quite new to find Strong-hand despondent.

"Nonsense! How could you know?" he answered briskly.

"Don't see how anyone could suspect such a beastly trap! I say, have you got any matches?"

A moment's pause.

"No. They've taken everything from me."

"I'm going to crawl round then," said Tom. "I've got irons on my legs, but they don't seem to be fastened to anything."

For the moment it seemed that Tom was the leading spirit. As a matter of fact he had got off with a much lighter shock than Saxon had received.

"Best be careful," said Saxon. "That's running water close by. The river, I suppose. If you fall in, there's an end of it."

"I'll look out," replied Tom, and, with irons clanking against the rock, he set out on hands and knees across the uneven floor of their subterranean prison.

The darkness was such as you find only in mines and caves. It was deeper than the blackest night. Tom had to feel every inch of his way.

He barked his shins against lumps of sharp rock, and blundered elbow deep into little pools of icy-cold water. He tried to guide himself by the sound of the rushing water, but this was impossible. Echoes so filled the place that he could not even tell on which side the river ran.

He struck his head against a solid wall of rock, and began feeling his way along it. Suddenly the floor sloped sharply downwards. The rock was smooth and slippery. A colder air struck his face. With a gasp of horror Tom found himself sliding down, down apparently into the bed of the subterranean torrent.

He spread his arms wide, and by happy chance his right hand caught a pointed spur of stalagmite. With a desperate effort he stopped himself.

He put out his left arm and felt in the blackness. Nothing! He was on the very edge of a cleft of unknown depth. The sullen roar below told him he was on the verge of the torrent.

It was at this moment that a sudden light irradiated the intense gloom. Clinging tight to his one support, Tom looked round.

Through a low arched entrance behind him a tall figure had entered the cavern. It was Stark.

In one hand the robber chief held a powerful electric lamp. In the other was a roll of paper. With his great height, his dark face, his piercing eyes, the man had the appearance of a handsome demon, a Mephistopheles such as Tom had once seen on the stage in his county town in the old country.

For a moment Stark stood there while his keen eyes roved over the rugged floor of the cavern. Then he caught sight of Tom.

"Ha, my friend! Exploring your new residence? Bit risky, isn't it?" He strode forward, and, seizing Tom by the shoulder, pulled him swiftly back to safety.

He held up his lamp, and the keen glitter fell on water—black like ebony, laced with long white streaks of foam, rushing at express speed through a deep channel, and vanishing abruptly under a low arch in the far wall of the vaulted chamber.

"Fall in there, and——" Stark made a significant gesture.

He turned to Saxon, who was lying perfectly quiet on his pile of straw at a little distance. "Hope you're better, Mr. Saxon?" he said. "What—won't answer? Not sulky, I hope?" He laughed. A harsh, grating laugh.

"You shouldn't bear malice, Mr. Saxon. Come, now. You must admit I did you rather cleverly. Ha, you were so cock-a-hoop! Bearding the bandit in his den, eh? Well, I hardly expected to trap the redoubtable Strong-hand so easily."

"Spare your sarcasm," replied Saxon quietly. "Now you've got us, what do you mean to do with us?"

"That, my friends, is a point for nice consideration. My men, I don't mind telling you, are annoyed. They, Jabe especially, have suggested many unpleasant things, of which running the gauntlet is the lightest."

He smiled unpleasantly.

"But I don't wish to be hard on you. Upon you in par-

ticular, Mr. Tom Holt. Show yourself reasonable, and I will do the same."

He set down the lamp on a great lump of rock and unrolled the paper in his hand.

"This, you see, is a deed. It is for the sale to me of Sunk River, the property which your uncle left to you. Sign it, and I'll let you and your father go at once. I will add to the sale money your tickets back to England. With three hundred pounds you ought to be able to do well in the old country."

"What—sign away Sunk River? Not I!" replied Tom sharply.

Stark shook his head. "I wouldn't speak hastily. I have your father's signature already."

"It's a lie! Father said he wouldn't sell. He doesn't change his mind."

Stark's dark face went a shade darker. He held the parchment up before Tom, turning the light full on it. "What about this?" he demanded harshly. "Will you deny that it is your father's signature?"

"It looks like it, but I believe it's a forgery," returned Tom stubbornly.

Stark's eyes had an angry gleam. "So you are obstinate? Wait, my young friend. I have means to break any will, no matter how stubborn."

He paused as if expecting Tom to speak. But Tom said nothing, only faced him with a scorn which the elder man tried vainly to glare down.

"I am to take it you won't sign?" said Stark at last.

"You are!"

"Very well. All the same, I shall give you one chance to reconsider your determination. Sign, and you can go. If you don't—well, remember you are absolutely in my power. No one knows where you are; and even if your police friends track you and get so far—which I very much doubt—I'll take precious good care they don't find the

mouth of the pass. You wouldn't have but for the fact that it was open, as they were expecting me."

He paused.

"I shall come to you again to-morrow. If you are still obstinate, I shall take measures—beginning with you, Mr. Strong-hand Saxon," he added, with a bitter sneer. "Jabe shall take a hand with you."

Tom started sharply. The last threat frightened him. He was going to speak, but, without another word, Stark had swung on his heel. The heavy door clanged behind him, and the two friends were left alone in the inky blackness of their prison.

"What did he mean about Jabe?" began Tom.

"Never mind what he meant." Saxon's voice was strong and stern again. "I want you, Tom, to give me your word you will not sign that deed."

"But if they start torturing——" There was a shudder in Tom's voice.

"Whatever happens. Do you think for one moment that Stark would keep his word and set any of us free? Not he! His word is worth that!" And Saxon snapped his strong fingers. "We know too much. We are dangerous. Unless we can escape, he will finish us one way or another."

Tom was silent.

"Don't be horrified, Tom. I'm telling you the truth, but, on the other hand, it's not all up yet. Stark doesn't know Dubois is on our side; hasn't an idea that he will be off for help. The police will get here sooner or later, and I've great faith in Colonel Westcott."

"But if Stark polishes us off before the police come, it won't be much good, will it?" suggested Tom.

Saxon chuckled. "No, not much. But one thing you may bet your last dollar on: Stark won't kill us till he's got that deed properly signed and sealed. Canada isn't quite like the States. Even out here you can't steal land without getting a proper title to it."

"Do you think father really signed that deed?" inquired Tom anxiously.

"I think what you do: that signature's a forgery."

They talked until they were interrupted by a rattling of bolts. The door opened again, and a negro came in with a light and a tray.

"So they don't mean to starve us," said Tom, as he caught sight of the contents of the tray.

It was nothing but a loaf of baking-powder bread and a chunk of canned beef; but they were hungry enough to eat anything.

"Can't you bring us some blankets, Sambo?" asked Saxon. "It's vilely cold here."

The coloured man touched his mouth and ears and shook his head. He laid the tray down and left.

"Deaf and dumb, I suppose," said Saxon. "Well, let's be grateful for small mercies." And, dividing the food into two portions, he gave half to Tom and set to work.

How long it was before anyone came near them again they had no means of judging. It seemed like days. They tried to sleep, lying close to one another for warmth; but the damp, chill air bit to their very bones, and for the most part they lay awake, shivering and wretched, with the din of the torrent in their ears.

At last the door opened again, and the keen glare of the electric torch lit up the saturnine face of Stark.

"Good morning," he said, in that strange, deep voice of his. "I fear your beds have not been all that could be desired. May I trust, Mr. Holt, that you have thought better of your decision of yesterday?" Tom was silent.

"I am sure you have had time to see the folly of your refusal," went on Stark, bringing out the deed and again unrolling it. "If you sign now, all your troubles are at an end. Here is the money." He flung down on the rock a canvas bag, which clanked heavily. "Three hundred in gold. Your father is waiting, and three horses are ready saddled."

As he finished speaking Stark laid the deed on the rock beside Tom, and took a fountain-pen from his pocket.

The boy was sorely tempted. The long, cold night had taken it out of him sadly. There is nothing harder to bear than long-continued cold. Three hundred pounds was worth having. It would give him and his father a start in this new country. Of course, it was a swindle; but, after all, was it not better to make the best of a bad job?

Saxon saw his hesitation. "Remember!" he whispered.

Tom braced himself. "I won't!" he answered desperately. "The place is ours. You've no right to swindle us out of it!"

"Swindle you?" exclaimed Stark. "I'm giving you very good value for land like that."

Tom flared up. "Value? This?"—pointing contemptuously to the bag of gold—"This? When there's a thousand times more gold for the digging in the Sunk River."

Stark started. "Who told you that?" he demanded, in a terrible voice.

"Never mind; I know; that's enough. And I swear to you I won't sign away a fortune!" As he spoke he snatched up the deed from the flat-topped rock and passionately tore it to pieces. Stark's fists clenched.

A wave of dull red swept into his dark cheeks. His deep-set eyes seemed to flash fire. Before he could find words, a squat, misshapen figure waddled into the circle of light. It was Jabe, the misshapen giant.

"Told ye they wouldn't, boss!" he growled out in his queer creaking voice. "Now ye'll give him ter me, boss. Ye can't say no."

He fixed his flaming little eyes on Saxon. There was something so repulsive about the creature that Tom felt almost sick.

"Take him," said Stark hoarsely, "take him to the pit!"

"What are you going to do with him?" demanded Tom fiercely.

Stark glared down at him. "You'll see when we get there," he replied grimly.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE PIT

"GIVE 'em knives!" shrieked an excitable Mexican.

"Guns, I say!" retorted a gaunt, fair-bearded mountaineer. "Tain't fair to put anyone up against Jabe. He's ekil to any two men as I ever seed in my life."

Stark's voice broke upon the tumult. "No guns, no knives, no weapons of any sort. Bare hands, and the best man wins."

An ugly smile curled Stark's thin lips.

"The best man!" muttered Tom bitterly. "Might as well pit a man against a grizzly bear."

"You, Louis," came Stark's voice again, "bring young Holt forward. Give our honoured guest a front seat."

Cruel laughter rose. Tom felt he had little sympathy to hope for in all this mixed gang of scoundrels.

Tom had been escorted through endless labyrinths of rock passages, and now found himself in a huge chamber of roughly oval shape. Through a vast hole in the vaulted roof, strong sunlight poured in.

Exactly under the opening was a circular pit in the floor of the cave. Whether natural or artificial Tom could not decide, but it was singularly regular in shape, being about twenty feet across and eight to nine deep. The floor was smooth rock, over which white sand had been scattered. Round its edges were grouped the whole of Stark's band—a motley crowd of criminals of every nationality. They were jabbering in half a dozen languages as Tom, led by the man named Louis, was pulled and pushed through them.

Jabe was already in the pit. Stripped to the waist, his huge body was one mass of gnarled and knotted muscles. His great mouth was stretched in a slobbering, ugly grin of anticipation; his little red eyes gleamed hungrily under their thatch of matted brows; his close-shorn head bristled like a convict's. He reminded Tom intensely of a wild beast waiting to be fed.

Saxon stood on one side of the pit. He, too, was stripped, but he had flung a coat over his bare shoulders. He stood there with folded arms, the quietest, coolest, most collected in the place. Of his father Tom saw no sign.

Tom forced his way to his friend's side. "You're not going to fight him, Saxon. He'll kill you. Saxon, I'd rather do anything, so would father. Let's sign the deed, and get out of this horrible place."

"No, Tom, I forbid you to make any terms with Stark. Besides, he wouldn't keep them. I'll take my chance." Saxon smiled quite cheerfully.

At that moment Stark suddenly towered over Tom.

"Changed your mind, eh? I'm a merciful man, and I'll give you one last chance."

Tom looked imploringly at Saxon. But the latter only shook his head.

"If you don't," went on Stark smoothly, "Strong-hand Saxon will have a chance to show what his strength is worth." And he smiled a cold, malignant smile.

Saxon looked him straight in the face.

"Against your deputy," he remarked, with cool scorn. "I notice *you* don't offer to meet me!" And he, too, smiled.

Stark's face went almost black. "I—you think I'm afraid of you?"

"Not when you've got a pistol and I'm wearing irons," returned Saxon sweetly.

Stark was dumb with fury. The veins on his forehead swelled as though they would burst.

"Come down into the pit and meet me bare-handed,"

went on Saxon. "No—you won't. You are a little afraid. Very well. First, I'll tackle your substitute. Afterwards, Mr. Stark, look out for yourself!"

He flung off his coat and leaped lightly down into the pit.

"Afterwards," Tom heard Stark mutter. "There won't be any afterwards!"

And, glancing down into the arena, Tom felt, with a pang of dread, that Stark was too probably right.

As Jabe and Saxon faced one another at the bottom of the pit dead silence fell. The whole of that vast, rocky vault was so quiet you might have heard a gnat buzz.

It was a strange sight. The ring of fierce faces and many-coloured clothes from the crimson sashes and silvered sombreros of the Mexicans to the black shirts and yellow leather belts of the men of the North-West.

And down in the centre, in the rock-walled arena, the two combatants warily facing one another.

The strong sunlight pouring through the vast aperture overhead bathed the arena in a vivid glare, making the shadowed space behind appear black as night by contrast.

Equally amazing was the contrast between the two men in the pit. Saxon with his white skin rippling over his lean, yet powerful frame, looked a mere boy compared with the brown ruggedness of his fearful opponent.

Jabe's skin was dark as tanned oak bark. His chest, shaggy with thick hair, was like a rock draped in moss. His arms, thick as an ordinary man's legs, were so long that his hands reached below his knees. He resembled nothing so much as the king of the Congo forest, the great man-ape known as the gorilla.

"He's a mighty fine man, that pardner o' yours," said someone just behind Tom. "'Tis a shame ter put him up against Jabe."

Tom glanced round sharply. The speaker was a rugged-looking mountaineer, the very same who had previously suggested that guns were the proper weapons for this fight.

"Thank you," answered Tom simply. It was something to feel that there was even one in all this hostile crowd who had a little sympathy with Saxon and himself.

The man looked at Tom with interest. He seemed to be going to speak again, but at that moment a thud and a gasp brought their eyes swiftly back to the pit.

Jabe, with a movement far more rapid than anyone would have supposed his heavy frame capable of, had made a rush at Saxon, and tried to pin him into a corner. Saxon waited till the man was almost on him, so near that Tom held his breath. He felt certain that Saxon would be caught.

At the very last moment Saxon swung sideways. His fist flashed, there was an echoing crack, and Jabe staggered back with a snarl of fury, the blood streaming from a split lip.

It was a blow that would have floored any other man, for Saxon had put all his weight into it. But the huge bow-legged beast was not as other men. His little eyes glowed red like lamps as he recovered himself and jumped at Saxon with amazing quickness.

But Saxon was quicker. Lithe as a cat he sprang aside, and Jabe, missing him a second time, crashed against the rock wall of the pit before he could pull up.

"Now's yer chance, Britisher!" growled the big mountain-eer behind Tom. Tom, his mouth dry with intensity of emotion, tried to shout encouragement, but could not utter a word.

With a sort of superb contempt, Saxon waited till his enemy had recovered from the shock.

It was fine, but foolish, for Jabe now was fighting mad. He looked perfectly demoniacal as he faced round. The blood was running down his hairy chest, and his muscles twitched with fury.

He had learned caution, too. That was the worst of it. He had realised that he must corner Saxon. He knew, and so did everyone else, that once in the grip of his mighty arms, the strongest man alive would be perfectly helpless.

He began manoeuvring, closing slowly in so as to pin Saxon into one corner of the pit.

Saxon saw what he was after and eluded him. For a minute at least the two feinted up and down across and across the sand-strewn floor of the arena.

"Go it, Jabe! Catch him! This ain't no puss in a corner racket!" shouted the spectators. Tom never heeded, he hardly heard. His eyes were glued on the combatants.

Slowly, slowly Jabe drove Saxon back. Able to stretch full seven feet from finger-tip to finger-tip, he covered so much ground that Saxon had much ado to elude him.

"'Tis a shame!" muttered the big man behind Tom. "Jabe wouldn't hev a chanst if the place wuz twice as big!"

Three times Saxon sprang past the swinging arms. Each time he drove in a body blow, and the men above yelled wildly. But the blows had little effect. It was like pounding a great log of oak. Jabe appeared impervious to pain.

It seemed to Tom that Saxon grew a little impatient. When Jabe came sliding up a fourth time with his curious shuffling gait, Saxon faced him full and hit out with tremendous power.

Jabe saw the blow coming, ducked and received it full on the top of his close-cropped head.

It seemed to Tom that the force of that blow was enough to fell an ox. Jabe hardly staggered. Was the creature made of iron?

Out shot an arm, long and muscular as that of a gorilla. Saxon had waited just one half second too long. As he sprang back the huge hairy fingers fell with a grip of steel upon his shoulder.

"Got him at last!" exclaimed the big mountaineer. "Reckon ez that's the last of it. That feller's stood up ter Jabe a sight longer nor anyone else ever did."

"Good fer you, Jabe! You've got him now!" came yells from all sides. But some of the men were silent, like the one who stood by Tom.

The fingers tightened till they sunk deep into the white flesh. Out flew the other arm, grasping at Saxon's waist.

Tom went white, and shivered. Saxon was pulling back with all his force and striking out fiercely with his right arm. Useless! He might as well have pulled against the grip of an octopus.

He lurched forward.

"He's down, he's down!" came wild shouts from the crowd around the pit top.

Tom saw his friend falling. With a bellow of rage he made a frantic effort to spring to his help. He had forgotten that his hands were tied, and Louis held the rope. He was jerked violently back.

What happened next was almost too quick for eyes to catch. Saxon, finding himself being pulled over, changed his tactics. Instead of holding back, he leaped in, and clutching Jabe by the hairy throat with his free hand, flung his whole weight against the creature.

Taken entirely by surprise, Jabe reeled backwards, made a frantic attempt to keep his feet, failed, staggered, and went over backwards on the rock with a crash like that of a falling tree, pulling Saxon on top of him.

"Seize him, Saxon! Throttle him!" roared Tom.

"By Jimmy, he'll win out now!" shouted the mountaineer, almost as excited as Tom.

Jabe kept his hold on Saxon's shoulder, but the shock of the fall, with all Saxon's weight on top, was so tremendous that his other arm failed to keep its hold round Saxon's waist.

It was back in a moment, but that moment made all the difference, for Saxon got a fair hold on the shaggy throat.

Losing his head, the dwarf giant hit out wildly, and his huge fists beat like hammers on Saxon's bare body, raising crimson stains wherever they struck.

But Saxon, like a terrier fixed to the throat of a bull, clung tighter and tighter, and shifting his other hand, got a double grip on the massive throat.

Jabe flung himself furiously to and fro, floundering like a stranded porpoise, and every second his monstrous fists pounded upon Saxon's back and ribs with a sound like the beating of a great drum.

Now pandemonium broke out above.

"Grip him, Jabe. Stop hitting him, you fool! Get him round the body. Squeeze the life out of him."

But not all yelled for the champion of the cave. Some were silent, watching with breathless interest the struggle of Titans. A few openly shouted for Saxon.

Tom, leaning tensely forward, hardly breathed. Could any man stand this awful flailing and live? And if Jabe took the advice of the spectators, changed his tactics, and once took fair hold of Saxon, it was all up. Saxon's ribs would crack like sticks in Jabe's terrific hug.

Ah, Jabe had heard! His wild blows ceased, his huge gnarled arms clipped tight round Saxon's body.

Saxon felt the danger. His fingers contracted like steel bands, the knuckles buried deep in Jabe's huge hairy neck. Not for nothing was he called "Strong-hand Saxon."

Jabe's convulsive grip pressed Saxon flat against his mahogany-like chest. The scout was in the jaws of a vice. But he never attempted to resist, only clutched the tighter.

The cave champion's dark face was blackening, his breath came in a shrill whistle. His struggles were appalling. He bounded all over the floor, till the sand flew in showers, and thick steam arose from the two streaming bodies.

It was now a question of endurance. Which would give out first? Would Saxon's ribs crack under that vice-like hug, or would his grip on Jabe's throat compel the latter to release his hold?

Tom gazing in agony saw that Saxon's face was turning white. The bear-like hug was crushing the life out of him. But Jabe, too, was showing symptoms of exhaustion. His hideous face was purple, his body no longer heaved and bounded on the rock floor.

Tom, shaking like a leaf with excitement, bent over the pit. "You've got him, Saxon. You've got him. One moment more, and he's done!"

It seemed that Saxon heard. Tom saw the muscles on his white shoulders ripple and quiver. He made a fierce final effort.

Jabe could stand the pressure on his throat no longer. With a strangling cry, he released his hold on Saxon's body and tried to tear away the strong brown hands that were so surely choking him.

The move was fatal. The very moment Saxon was freed he took a long, gasping breath. Tom saw his wide white chest fill with life-giving air.

With a movement quick as light, up he went to his knees. Then, before Jabe's grasp could meet upon his wrist, he suddenly lifted the monster's massive head and banged it down with all his force upon the floor.

The thud of bone on rock was heard to the furthest confines of the cave. For a second there was intense silence in all the watching throng.

The crash was more than even that triple-thick skull could stand. Jabe's clutching arms fell back, his heels beat a horrid tattoo upon the ground, his fierce little eyes closed. The cave champion lay stunned, insensible, perhaps dead.

"Won out!" roared the gaunt mountaineer. "By snakes, he's won out, an' I'm glad of it! He's a fine——" But his words were drowned in the roar that broke from everyone in the great rock chamber.

Some were furious at the defeat of their champion. They howled abuse at Saxon, who stood leaning against the side of the pit, gasping, exhausted, the perspiration pouring off his smoking body.

Others—and these the best of the band—stood silent, while a few even dared applaud the scout.

Tom cast a glance at Stark. He stood there staring fixedly

at Saxon. He was scowling savagely, his thin lips tightened to a mere line.

He roused himself, and his voice rose harshly above the uproar.

"Stop yelping, ye idiots! Take Jabe up from there. Help Saxon out an' take him an' Holt back where they came from."

Louis tightened his hold on Tom. "Get round!" he ordered roughly.

The tall mountaineer stooped swiftly towards the boy. "Stark means bad to ye," he whispered sharply. "It's a durned shame! Ef it comes to the worst, take ter the river."

Tom glanced at him in amazement. "The river?"

"Aye, it's straight. Ef ye can swim, it's a chance. Down stream, mind. The tunnel——"

Tom heard no more.

But as he was dragged back through the maze of rock galleries his heart beat high at the possibility of escape from this nest of scoundrels.

CHAPTER XXIV

TOM IS OBSTINATE

"No, Saxon," said Tom earnestly, "I won't go without father."

"You're foolish, lad. We shan't get another chance like this, now that your friend's left our irons unlocked. Tomorrow Stark will try some new game. On you probably."

"Can't help that," returned Tom stubbornly. "I can't clear out and leave poor old dad in this beastly hole."

"But once we're away we put the police on the track. Remember, Dubois is already on his way to fetch them. If we can get out by this river, as your friend the long mountaineer told you, we can guide Colonel Westcott's men into the place."

But Tom was not to be convinced. "You said yourself, Saxon, that ten men could hold the pass against a thousand. Anyhow, Stark can make what terms he pleases while dad's in his hands. Why, he might even torture him." Tom's voice shook at the horrible suggestion.

"It's all true, what you say, Tom," said Saxon wearily. "At the same time I don't know what good you expect to do your father or anyone else by staying in this ice-box. Another day of it will finish us both."

Saxon spoke almost despondently. The fact was that the terrible strain of the life and death battle with Jabe had taken it out of him badly.

Tom made no answer; and for some minutes the chill silence of their black prison vault was broken only by the

low but never ceasing hiss of the black river coursing through its rock-bound bed.

Suddenly Tom felt Saxon's hand clutch his arm.

"Listen!" muttered the scout in a sharp whisper.

There was a slight scuffling sound somewhere out in the black darkness beyond.

Tom put his mouth to Saxon's ear. "Someone at the door. Stark!"

"Aye. Our chance, Tom. Quick!"

Already the scout was crawling rapidly and silently away across the uneven floor in the direction of the sound.

Tom's heart beat thickly as he followed. What a chance! Stark, under the full impression that his prisoners were ironed, would walk in unsuspectingly. If they got him this time, Tom promised himself they would take no more chances.

There was the click of a key in the well-oiled lock. A patch of light appeared against the blackness. It flashed upon Tom that it was yellow, not white like that of Stark's electric torch.

The door opened softly, and a figure appeared. Tom bit off a sharp exclamation as the smoky glare of a flaming torch revealed not Stark, but the huge, uncouth form of Jabe, the ape-man.

A filthy bloodstained bandage enfolded his huge head, and in his monstrous right fist he grasped a knotted bludgeon. His fiery eyes glowed with a mad lust for vengeance.

For one horrified instant Tom hesitated, appalled at the hideous unexpectedness of the apparition. Then, thud, and a crack like stone meeting rock. Saxon had sprung upon Jabe, his iron-hard fist striking the brute full on the jaw.

Taken utterly by surprise, Jabe reeled backwards, hitting out wildly with his club. The bludgeon struck a great pendent stalactite a ringing blow, and flew out of Jabe's hand.

The torch, too, dropped, and lay flaring smokily on the floor.

Tom bounded forward and snatched it up. At the same instant there was a crash as Saxon and Jabe, clutched in one another's arms, went reeling to the ground.

There followed a frightful struggle on the wet, uneven rock. Jabe, fired with revenge, seemed endowed with super-human strength. Next moment he had rolled Saxon over on his back, and was clutching for his throat. Saxon, with arms rigid like bars, held him off by main strength.

Tom caught a glimpse of the hideous ape-like face grinning fiercely into Saxon's. Where was the club? For the very life of him he could not find it.

"Help, Tom!" gasped Saxon. His great strength was giving out. Another moment it would be too late.

Suddenly Tom put his foot on the club, which had rolled into a crevice in the floor. It was the work of a second to snatch it up, whirl it high overhead and bring it down with all his force on the ape-man's skull.

One groan and the brute collapsed, almost crushing Saxon under his ponderous weight.

"Just in time, Tom," gasped Saxon, as soon as he could speak.

"I had to do it," said Tom, gazing down at the limp, repulsive bulk upon the floor.

"My dear boy, you need have no more compunction than if you were dealing with a wild beast. You haven't killed him, if that's any consolation," went on Saxon. "Bring those irons, lad. We'll make sure of him this time. Serve the brute right if we chucked him into the river."

"Just as well we didn't start down the river," remarked Tom slyly, as he turned out Jabe's pockets and secured the key of their prison, a useful six-shooter, a small coil of rope, and some matches. "Now for dad."

It was wonderful how cheered they both felt. With light and weapons and a way out of their prison, they felt fit for anything.

Carefully shading the torch, they crept cautiously up long,

echoing rock corridors. Passages criss-crossed in a perfect maze, but Saxon had been through them once, and for him that was enough. He knew the way, as far as the pit, and that was the point they made for.

They reached this without meeting a soul or hearing any sound of life. Entering the huge cavern, the scene of the battle, they found the place silent and deserted. Through the great gap in the roof they saw the stars twinkle frostily, and could hear the soft sighing of the fresh night breeze.

"Must be about two in the morning," whispered Saxon, after a glance at the stars.

"Best time for us," replied Tom. "Wonder if we can find where father is," he added anxiously.

"Think so," said Saxon quietly. "This is on the top level of the cave. The mouth can't be far off."

"Wish we could climb up there," muttered Tom, pointing to the great opening in the roof.

But Saxon only shook his head and turned back into the main passage.

A faint gleam of light appeared in the distance.

"Put out that torch, Tom," ordered Saxon. "That's one of the electrics."

Another minute and they were stealing silently up the great corridor off which opened the numbered doors. Most of the lights had been turned off, but enough remained to show the way.

"Curious, not meeting anyone," whispered Tom.

"Not a bit. There's no danger to be expected from behind. The gang all live in the outer cave, and the sentinels are in the pass."

"Here's number three," muttered Tom in a shaking voice, as he paused outside the massive door of the apartment where two nights before he had seen his father.

"Keep cool, Tom," replied Saxon, noticing the boy's excitement. His hand was steady as a rock as he tried the door.

Much to his surprise, the handle turned, and it opened easily. All was dark inside.

"Give me the pistol, Tom," said Saxon in the lowest possible whisper. "And strike a light. Look out for the charged plate," he added.

The glimmer of the match-flame enabled them to step clear of the electric danger, and they found themselves in the gorgeously furnished apartment which they both remembered so distinctly.

Saxon quietly closed the door behind them. It was just as well he did so, for Tom catching sight of his father asleep on the couch beyond the fireplace sprang forward with a cry of delight.

John Holt, wakened by the sound, sat up sharply, and gazed in utter amazement at his son.

"Tom! Tom!" he muttered in a dazed way.

Saxon had to do the explaining. Tom was incoherent. Holt listened intently, his shrewd face puckered with thought.

"You haven't signed?" broke in Tom anxiously.

"No, I reckoned there was summat a bit crooked about the business. But, laws, I never thought as Stark was that bad."

"Surely you could see for yourself what a precious pack of ruffians he has round him!" exclaimed Saxon.

"Ain't they miners?" asked Mr. Holt. "That's what Stark told me. Said this was a gold mine."

Saxon gave a short laugh. "The gold mine's on your own place, Mr Holt. And that's why Stark wants to swindle you of it."

John Holt stared. "Gold on my place! Sunk River, you mean?"

"Exactly! Tons of it!" exclaimed Tom. "But, I say, let's go. The sooner we're out of this nest of thieves, the better."

"Seems to me 'tain't very likely Stark'll let us go if what you and Mr. Saxon say be true," observed Holt shrewdly.

Saxon smiled grimly. "You're right, Mr. Holt. He'd sooner murder the lot of us out of hand."

"Then how be you going to leave?"

"By the back door," replied Saxon, who was filling his pockets with candles, matches, and other odds and ends he thought might be useful. "Tom, we'll have to trust to your friend, and try the river."

"Takes a bit of nerve to get down into that," said John Holt, as he held the flickering candle over the swirling black water.

Saxon swung his legs over the ledge and dropped quietly. The racing torrent took him almost to the waist, but he steadied himself.

"All right, I can stand," he said. "Have you locked the door, Tom?"

Tom said he had, and followed Saxon.

"Ugh!" he gasped, for the water was bitter cold. "Careful, father! The bottom's like glass."

Mr. Holt sat down and slipped over into the river, and, each holding tight to the rope, the three set to wading down the sluicing stream.

A few yards further the whole river, running at tremendous speed down a steeply sloping bed, disappeared under a low arch with an unpleasant roaring sound.

Saxon, leading, waded slowly under the arch, and the others followed.

On and on they went, their guttering candles throwing weird shadows on the ebony surface of the swift water. Slipping, sliding, stumbling, they passed into the unknown heart of the mountain.

"Only hope that chap told the truth," was Tom's unspoken thought. "I don't believe we could ever struggle back against this."

The roof dropped till it came right down on their heads, and suddenly Saxon stopped.

"We're done," he said. "The water fills the tunnel to the roof."

"Then we must go back," said Tom, with the calmness of despair.

"Nothing else for it," replied Saxon curtly.

But when they turned they found that it was flatly impossible to make way against the stream. The great weight of water forced them back, and the limestone walls were too smooth to give hand-hold.

Saxon stopped again. "I'm going to dive for it," he announced. "Give me all the rope you can. If it's a dead weight, pull me back. If you feel two jerks, follow me."

Tom would have remonstrated, but what was the good?

Saxon slipped the candle into a pocket, made the rope fast round his waist, spread his hands above his head and plunged.

The rope ran out swiftly. Tom and his father, holding it, said not a word.

Yard by yard the rope vanished till only a few feet remained. Saxon was down in that roaring black spout nearly thirty feet away.

Tom glanced up at his father. "We must pull him back," he said. There was despair in his face.

"If we can," replied the elder man.

Tom had actually taken a turn of the rope round his wrist preparatory to the attempt to pull Saxon back when there came a sudden sharp twitch.

A moment of desperate suspense; then a second jerk.

"He's safe!" Tom shouted in triumph, and his voice echoed hollow up the long rock tunnel.

"You next, father," said Tom. "Take a long breath, hold tight to the rope, and let the stream take you."

John Holt looked doubtfully at the water-filled tunnel. "Never was much hand at diving even when I were a lad at school," he remarked. "But needs must, I reckon; so here goes!"

Next moment he had boldly taken the plunge, and Tom was left alone.

It seemed a terribly long time before two tugs told him his father was safe. Then he had to blow out his own candle and make his preparations in inky darkness.

He filled his lungs with air, and, seizing the rope, ducked downwards and sprang forward into the rock pipe.

The water roared in his ears. He felt himself borne forward with tremendous speed. Then suddenly a sharp drop, and he was shot like a cork from a bottle through a narrow opening into still water.

As he rose to the surface the light of a candle glimmered in his eyes, and a strong hand caught him and lifted him to his feet.

"All right, Tom?" asked Saxon anxiously.

"Right as a trivet, but where in the name of sense have we got to?"

"Some sort of an underground lake." And Saxon lifted the candle over his head.

The pale light shone upon an apparently endless expanse of water, smooth as a looking-glass and black as polished steel. The rock roof was hung thick with stalactites, the sharp points of which in places almost touched the surface of the lake.

But what struck Tom most forcibly was the extraordinary warmth of air and water. The atmosphere was full of a thin vapour.

"It's like a hot-house," he exclaimed in amazement.

"Hot springs," said Saxon shortly.

"Nice and warm after that cold stuff up above," put in Mr. Holt. "I was near perished."

"But how are we going to find our way out?" inquired Tom in dismay. "There's no beach to walk on."

"Wade or swim, lad," replied Saxon.

"We don't know which way to go."

For answer Saxon took out a knife, cut a shaving of wax from his candle and dropped it lightly on the water.

Slowly but surely it moved away.

"There's a current, Tom, so there must be an outlet," he said quietly. "All we've got to do is to follow the stream."

"We can't go back—that's one thing sure," put in Mr. Holt. "Hope it ain't very deep, Mr. Saxon, I'm no great shakes at swimming."

"Tom and I will ferry you," replied Saxon cheerily. No difficulty ever daunted Saxon so long as he was able to be up and doing.

Tom, who had been peering round in every direction, gave a delighted exclamation. "No need for that. Here's a raft ready made." His quick eye had caught sight of a log, swept down no doubt by some flood, caught in an angle under the cavern wall.

He waded off and brought it back. Though somewhat water-logged, it floated well, and bore Mr. Holt's weight. Tom and Saxon each laid hold of one end, and, swimming easily, pushed out across the wide spaces of the mysterious underground lake.

The current helped them, and the warmth of the tepid water was most pleasant after the bitter chill of the upper river.

"Current's getting stronger," said Saxon, after they had been swimming for about twenty minutes.

"Water's getting hotter, too," replied Tom. "Nice joke if we run into one of these hot springs."

"I fancy they're over at the side," said Saxon. "The steam hangs heavier there."

The stream grew swifter. There was no longer any need to swim. They were carried along at a smart pace. The vapour was so thick they could see nothing beyond a few yards. It eddied like fog over the calm surface of the water.

Presently a low roaring came faintly to their ears.

"That's the outlet, Tom," said Saxon. "If it's like the other place it won't do to be washed into it, log and all."

This chunk of timber would simply pulp us if it came on top of us."

"It's all right," replied Tom cheerily. "I can touch bottom."

He and Saxon got their feet upon the unseen rock at the bottom of the lake, and, checking the log slightly, made their way through the thick hot mist in the direction of the distant roaring.

"There's rock. I see it through the mist," exclaimed Tom.

"And there's the hole the water goes out through. Thank goodness, there's plenty of room!"

Farmer Holt gave a pleased chuckle. "Glad there ain't need for diving again. Don't mind telling ye, Tom, I was terrible scared when I had to pop down that place like a rabbit down a bury."

"You're not scared now, dad?"

"Not a mite. What's to harm one in this nice warm water?"

"Dear old dad!" thought Tom. "Never thought he'd take it so well."

Reaching the tunnel mouth, they found a wide stream pouring down a steep incline. The water was breaking white among the big black rocks, tumbling and foaming with a roar that echoed weirdly against the arched roof of the cavern.

Saxon seated himself on a rock that rose above the water. "Better rest a minute," he said. "We don't know what we've got before us down there." He pulled a package from his dripping coat.

"Here's some food of sorts which I found in Stark's room. A tin of sardines and one of biscuit." He opened the tin with a knife and passed it round.

"Wonder what the folks at home'd say if they could see us sitting here on a rock in the middle of a mountain eating our supper," observed Mr. Holt with his dry chuckle.

They all laughed.

"What I wonder," said Tom, "is whether old Stark has found out yet that we're gone. I'd like to see his face when he does."

"He'll be fit to murder that ugly chap, Jabe," added his father.

"Only hope he won't take it into his head to visit our prison before morning," said Saxon seriously. "I want to be clear of the Robbers' Roost before the alarm is given. Mind you, they've got horses, and we've got to trust to shanks's mare. Now, if you've finished the tin, we'd best be moving. We must rope ourselves before starting."

Saxon led the way, Mr. Holt was next, Tom brought up the rear. In this order they started down over the slippery, slimy rocks.

It was an ugly business. There were deep holes where the water boiled in sullen whirlpools, and long slides of rock worn smooth as glass where their feet could find no hold, and where they had to be let down one by one, clinging to the rope. Once they found a sheer fall of bubbling foam, the height of a man. Without the rope they could never have tackled it.

Luckily the roof was high enough to give head room, and the big boulders afforded good hand-holds. On the whole they travelled rapidly.

Suddenly Saxon, who was in advance, gave a low exclamation. A patch of grey light was visible dead ahead.

Another minute and they had scrambled out of the tunnel and stood at the bottom of a narrow ravine with the sweet, fresh mountain air in their nostrils and the star-strewn sky overhead.

CHAPTER XXV

THE BATTLE IN THE PASS

RIGHT overhead a dark something spanned the rift.

Saxon pointed. "There's the bridge," he said.

"What, we've come out in the pass!" exclaimed Tom sharply.

"And a bad job, too! I'd hoped we'd reached the foot of the mountain."

"We're on the right side of the stables," suggested Tom.

"Stables, you say!" exclaimed Mr. Holt, perking up. "Give me a horse, and I'll soon leave this pesky mountain behind."

Saxon stood silent a moment. He was thinking hard. "All right," he said at last. "We'll try it. It's worth the risk." As he spoke he flung the rope up over the bridge, and as the loose end fell across, caught it. "Up you go, Tom. Not a minute to waste. The dawn's breaking."

In a couple of minutes they were all three out of the water and up in the pass. The wind struck bitterly chill after the warmth of the water, and their teeth chattered.

"Can't we break down the bridge?" suggested Tom. "It'd stop the beggars coming after us."

But Saxon shook his head. "No time. And, look here, before we go on, just remember there must be no noise. There'll be men in the stable, and probably a guard at the mouth of the pass. If they tackle us, hit hard. For any sake don't let them use their guns."

Tom nodded, and the dripping, shivering procession started rapidly down between the tall walls of sheer rock which hemmed in the narrow pass.

They passed down the ladder, now more firmly riveted

than ever, and presently were at the fork of the pass which led to the stables.

Saxon paused, and, flinging the cartridges out of the pistol which he had taken from Stark's room, reloaded.

"Thought you wasn't going to have any shooting, Mr. Saxon," remarked John Holt drily.

"Not if I can help it. But better shoot than be shot."

"Aye," said the other. "That's sound sense; but I'd as lief have a good hay-fork as aught else, if so be I've got to fight a quarrel."

Rounding the corner, they were in sight of the light from the stable cave.

"No guard outside. That's a jolly good job!" said Saxon. "Keep close."

Keeping well under the deep shadow of the rock wall, Saxon hurried forward until he reached the entrance and could peer into the low-roofed cavern.

Not a sound but a horse slowly munching a rack-full of hay and the occasional rattle of a halter chain.

"Slack watch these chaps keep," muttered Tom.

"Aye; but it means they've got a guard at the mouth of the pass. Come on in and pick your beasts."

"Horse-stealing at my time of life," chuckled Farmer Holt. "This be a terrible job."

"He's wonderful!" thought Tom. "This life seems to suit the old dad down to the ground."

Not a soul interfered with them while they picked the three best horses they could see, and saddled and bridled them.

"This luck's too good to last," said Tom, as he led his beast out of its stall.

"It will be if you don't muffle your animal's shoes," returned Saxon sharply. "Tie some sacking over them."

Ashamed of his carelessness, Tom did as he was bid, and, followed close by his father, led his horse out of the cave.

He was hardly outside when there came the sharp trilling of an electric-bell from somewhere in the depths of the cave.

Saxon swung to the saddle. "Ride for your life!" he cried. "That's a telephone. They've found we've gone!" Tom shoved his foot in the stirrup so hastily, that his horse, which was evidently very fresh, bounded sideways, nearly pulling him down. At the same moment a door banged somewhere in the depths of the cave.

"Who's that?" roared a voice. A pistol cracked and a bullet clipped past so close that Tom felt the wind of it on his cheek.

"Steady, lad!" cried Saxon, and, swinging his horse round, forced it up against Tom's excited beast. "Quick, now!" And somehow Tom scrambled into the saddle.

Two more leaden messengers smacked against the wall of the pass just over his head, and he heard the clatter of running feet as he jammed his heels in and went pounding furiously down the steep pass.

How the horses kept their feet was simply a miracle. It was the sacking on their hoofs which saved them from a dozen falls on the slippery rock.

A regular volley crashed out behind, but the fugitives were round the bend in an instant, and galloping wildly down the main pass.

The dawn was breaking. The stars were paling. In the dim, grey light Tom could see his father just ahead of Saxon.

The old man was sitting down and riding as Tom had never seen him ride. His soft felt hat was jammed tight over his ears, and his wet coat-tails fluttered behind him.

Saxon next, controlled, with iron hand, the powerful bay which he had chosen. As for Tom himself, it was all he could do to keep his frantic animal from bolting altogether.

From somewhere high up the mountain came the crashing report of a heavy gun.

"A signal," thought Tom. "They'll be waiting for us at the mouth of the pass."

Saxon turned in his saddle. "We must ride 'em down. It's our only chance."

Tom set his teeth. He had picked up a three-foot iron bar in the stable, and now he swung it at arm's-length. It was an ugly weapon in his strong hands.

They were round the last bend. The walls were high here, and the pass so narrow that only a dim twilight filtered down from above.

Was there anyone there? Yes—two, three, by Jove! half a dozen men were bunched together just beside the outlet.

Tom heard shouts and a snapping crackle of firing. Apparently no one was hit. The light was treacherous, and they were riding too hard to be easy marks.

Next moment they were in among the guard. Tom saw a man jump at his father's bridle. He was bowled over like a ninepin, and a scream told that the horse's hoofs had crashed upon his body.

Saxon was firing as he came. The nearest man to him dropped without a cry. A great copper-faced mulatto blazed at Tom, so close that the powder stung his face. But the bullet whizzed into space, and Tom's iron bar dropped upon the man's skull.

With a wild yell Tom drove forward at another who was in the very act of aiming at Saxon's back. His horse swerved, and he missed the fellow's head. But the end of the bar got him in the forearm, and the man dropped his pistol and stood screaming like a stuck pig.

Four were accounted for. The other two bolted like rabbits into a sort of cranny in the rock, falling over one another in their wild efforts to get away.

"Hurrah!" roared Tom, and was reining round after them when Saxon seized his bridle.

"Hurry, you young idiot. Don't you hear 'em after us?"

From the pass behind came the thud of a score of men running hard. Above the tramp of their feet was heard the sharp clatter of iron-shod hoofs.

The mouth of the pass was too narrow and crooked to take a horse through faster than a walk. Before Tom,

who was last of the three, could force his restive beast through the opening, the cliffs echoed to a crashing volley, and bullets pattered like hail upon the rocks.

One cut Tom's horse across the quarters, and the frightened animal made a wild plunge which nearly unseated the boy.

Next moment he was clear, and all three were galloping like mad across the open glade.

Saxon flashed to the front and led the way. The other two followed. Where, they had no idea. They trusted their leader. All they had to do for the moment was to get out of range.

But there was no more shooting. The pace was too hot for that, and in another minute they were among the trees.

From their shelter a man, evidently an outpost of Stark's, sprang out, pointed a rifle point-blank at Saxon, and fired.

The shot missed by a fraction of an inch, and the man turned to run; Tom launched out with his iron bar, and felled him to the ground.

"Quick!" said the undaunted Saxon. "Take his gun and cartridges. They may be useful." Tom did so quickly.

"Hurry!" shouted Saxon. "There's a whole bunch of them on us."

Tom flung a glance back over his shoulder. There were all of a dozen in the first bunch behind them, and more were pouring out of the pass.

"Phew—a regular young army!" muttered the boy. "And Stark at the head of 'em. Mad as a hornet, too, I'll bet. It'll be boiling oil or something equally unpleasant, if he gets his claws on us again."

Saxon took hold of his horse's head. Tom drew abreast.

"I'm making for the Fort," cried the scout. "May meet Westcott and his men."

"But this isn't the way we came."

"Can't take horses that way. Got to go round. Long way, too; so save your horses all you can."

"We've got the pick of Stark's stable, anyhow."

"And a score of his beggars after us. Don't you run away with any notion that it's all over bar shouting. We're not out of the wood by a long chalk. Stark's rabid, and he'll do all he knows."

Mr. Holt was drawing away. Tom shouted to him to steady his animal.

Now they were galloping up a long slope. The sun was above the eastern mountains, and hot on their backs. The sky was blue as turquoise. It was the most glorious day that Tom had seen since he landed in America.

Cleckety clack on a bit of bare rock, then a drumming thud as they were on turf again. Now they had to pull out to avoid a slough or to go round a fallen tree which lay across the track.

Uphill all the way, it was rough on the horses.

Soon they were black with sweat, and Tom's was blowing hard. But, as the boy had said, they were the pick of Stark's stable. They were gaining. They could still hear their pursuers—an occasional shout in the distance or the faint clatter of hoofs on stone.

But the sounds were dying away, and after two hours of steady going they faded entirely, and the little party of three were alone in the silent wilderness.

Saxon drew rein by a little mountain brook, and sprang from his saddle. Tom and his father followed his example.

"Give 'em a minute's breather," said the scout, as he filled his hat with water, and washed out the mouth of his panting horse.

"Seem to ha' pulled clear o' them," exclaimed Mr. Holt cheerily.

"For the minute—only for the minute," replied Saxon sharply. "Don't make any mistake. We've got all the worst of it before us. Look there!" And he pointed on in front to where, in the distance, a great ragged ridge of rock crowned the mountain, and seemed to bar their road like a solid wall.

"There's only one way through that," he went on. "Pickett's Pass, they call it. As ugly a bit as I know anywhere. Narrow as the road up the Robber's Roost. Steep as the roof of a house, and all loose stones and boulders. If we win through, there's good going beyond, and I reckon Colonel Westcott won't be a great way off. At least, I hope so."

Saxon tightened his girths and flung himself into the saddle again, and once more the three went steadily galloping up the never-ending hill.

The air grew keener, the trees were smaller and more scattered, and grass gave way to rock and boulders.

Higher and higher. The bridle path ran in great curves up the mountain-side, and the black rock edge turned itself into a huge frowning wall, without the sign of any way through it.

Presently they were above the trees. All of a sudden something that whined like the vibration of an over-taut violin string passed Tom's head, and struck a boulder beyond with the sound of a slap.

Some seconds later a pop like a toy gun came faintly from the blue valley below.

"They've spotted us!" cried Saxon. "Stark's putting out sharp-shooters. Ride like thunder! We'll be safe in the pass."

Tom drove in his heels, and, lying flat on their horses' backs, they tore forwards as fast as the rugged ground would let them.

More bullets pinged overhead, but the range was tremendous—nearly a mile. No one was hit.

A black crack appeared in the face of the tall grey cliffs.

"There's the mouth of the pass," cried Saxon encouragingly. "Hold up, horse!" as his animal stumbled over a loose round stone and nearly came to its knees.

They had to ride steady now. The going was simply awful. Big rocks and little rocks tumbled in wild confusion. The beat of their horses' feet echoed loudly back from the tall

cliffs which crowned the summit of the mountain just as a rock turret tops a Dartmoor tor.

Shouts from below. Faint, but distinct.

"Beggars have spotted us again!" growled Tom, glancing back. But he could see nothing except the deep, dull green of the tops of the fir trees. The forest hid the whole valley.

Once more rifles popped and bullets screamed through the air. Saxon waved his hand towards the great black chasm in the cliffs in front. "Can't hit us once we're in there," he cried.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when his horse gave a startled sideways jump, struck its feet against a boulder, and came down heavily, flinging Saxon clean over its head.

Tom was off in a jiffy, but Saxon was already on his feet.

"Hurt?" gasped Tom.

"Only winded," gulped Saxon, making for the horse, which had scrambled to its feet, and stood with hanging head and heaving flanks looking very sorry for itself.

"What did it?" exclaimed Tom.

Saxon was already examining the animal. "This," he said, and pointed to a red score across the flank where one of the pursuer's bullets had grazed the skin.

Tom gave a sigh of relief. "No harm in that, anyhow."

"No; the trouble's here. Look at his knees!" returned Saxon, with a grunt of disgust.

"Phew, that's bad!" replied Tom, looking with dismay at the scarred and bleeding knees.

"No time to do anything now," said Saxon hurriedly. "Get along, Mr. Holt. We'll catch you up."

He sprang into the saddle again, and once more they were off. But now Tom's beast, which had up to now had all it could do to keep up with the fine animal Saxon was riding, flashed to the front.

Saxon groaned. His horse was all to pieces.

Tom pulled up. "Bame, isn't it?"

"Bame as a tree," replied Saxon grimly. Then, as a

couple of bullets splashed on the cliff-side, not ten feet away, "Get on!" he cried impatiently. "No use wasting time. We must get into the pass."

Tom obeyed, and once they had scrambled up the hill into the narrow portals of the pass, the firing ceased.

Saxon pulled his beast to a walk. The whole floor of the pass was one clitter of rough stone. It was flatly impossible to canter a lame horse across such a surface.

John Holt dropped back to his fellow-fugitives.

"Your beast looks pretty nigh done for, Mr. Saxon. I reckon we'd best stop here and hold 'em off with your revolver and that carbine Tom's commandeered; it seems a useful kind o' weapon."

The old man was cool as a cucumber. Saxon gave him a glance of keen approval.

"It's not as bad as all that," he answered quickly. "You jog along, Mr. Holt. Tom and I will catch you up in a minute or two."

"All right. You're in command," replied the other simply. He rode on.

Saxon waited only till he was out of earshot, then he turned to Tom, and his face was like flint.

"Tom, you've got to go on and get your father safe."

"What—and leave you? I'll be shot if I do!"

"You're liable to be shot, anyway. You certainly will be, if you don't obey. Look here, your father don't know the way, and you do. At least, you've some notion of the lie of the land. You and your father make for Fort Victoria as hard as you can split. Ten to one you'll meet the Colonel before you've gone far. Bring him back, and with any luck, you'll bag the whole outfit."

"And what about you?" Tom's face was as stubborn as Saxon's own.

"I shall be all right. There's a bit of a cave up at the top of the pass. Just beyond the narrowest. That's where I mean to lie up. They can't touch me, and if any of 'em

try to rush me, I reckon I can pump lead into 'em with your carbine quick enough to stop 'em."

"Dad can find his own way. I'll stay with you."

"No, you won't, Tom. You'll go on with your father and bring help."

Tom stood like a rock.

"Tom," said Saxon quietly, "your father allowed I was in command."

Tom looked piteously at his friend. "I know what it is. You mean to chuck your own chance just to save us. D'ye think I can ever show my face again, if I desert you now?"

"Boy, if you stand here arguing, they'll have us all. My chances are better than you think. As long as my cartridges last I can stand them off. Now I order you to take your father to safety, and bring back help as soon as you can."

Once more Tom opened his mouth to protest. At that moment the clatter of galloping horses rang on the rocks below. Saxon seized the rein of his horse and set off at a smart run, dragging the poor limping beast behind him.

Towards the top of the slope the walls of the pass closed in, and the path became a trail so narrow that two could barely walk abreast.

Then it widened again a little, and there were a few yards of level ground before it began to drop to the western plain.

"Here we are," exclaimed Saxon, pointing to a deep recess in the left-hand cliff. "That's my fort; and if I don't make Stark's crowd sorry for themselves, it won't be the fault of me or of this."

Tom made a last appeal to stay and help. Saxon flatly refused.

Tom unbuckled the gun and cartridge belt and dropped them into the cave. One strong hand-clasp, and the boy was in his saddle riding hard after his father.

"Good lad!" said Saxon approvingly, as he led his horse rapidly into the cave. "That's one time it was harder to go than to stay."

CHAPTER XXVI

SAXON AT BAY

Loose rocks lay everywhere. Having forced his horse well out of sight near the back of the cave, Saxon laid his carbine against the wall and began feverishly piling the biggest stones in a breastwork just inside the mouth of the cave.

He worked with such speed that before the first of Stark's men was heard clattering into the mouth of the pass, he had a two-foot wall, thick enough to stop any bullet.

Behind this he flung himself down, rifle in hand, and lay quite still, taking long breaths of the cool cave air. He wanted to steady his nerves before the shooting began in earnest.

The rattle of steel on stone grew louder. Saxon judged by the sound there were already half a dozen in the pass. He took off his hat and peered cautiously round the corner.

"Five, six, seven—phew! nine of 'em to begin with, and more coming. That's long odds. Never mind. They haven't a notion I'm laid up here, and it's hard if I don't bag at least three before they get the office."

Saxon had fought Indians. He was accustomed to long odds; and, like men of his type, was never so cool as when in a really tight place.

He cuddled his rifle to his cheek, while his brown forefinger crooked itself over the trigger.

Stark's men were not riding fast. No horse could have kept its legs on such ground at anything beyond a fox-trot. They were coming up single file, headed by an ugly little Mexican, whose fierce brown face was disfigured by a long knife scar across the cheek.

Instinctively Saxon kept the sight of his gun upon that crimson mark, and waited—waited.

“Now for it!” he muttered at last. His finger tightened, and as the crack of the cordite rang among the rocks the Mexican toppled off his horse without a word or sound.

The frightened animal came galloping past. Saxon let it go.

The second man tried to rein round. Before he could do so a second bullet caught him through the body, and down he went under the prancing hoofs of the third man’s horse.

Crack! Crack! The carbine was talking fast and venomously. The finest shot in the North-West was keeping the pass, and of his bullets few failed to find a billet either in body or brain.

Four were down, a fifth had lost his horse. The rest, terrified at this unexpected attack, had dodged for shelter among the boulders, leaving their dead where they lay.

“None so dusty,” said Saxon as he rapidly refilled his magazine. “Shoot away, my friends!” he chuckled, as bullets began to patter thick on the rocks all round him. “Keeps you interested, and don’t hurt me.”

Fresh clatterings up the pass.

“More arrivals,” thought Saxon, but the fire was too hot for him to dare to raise his head, much as he would have liked to greet the new-comers like the last.

He lay still for a long time. The firing slowly died away, and for a minute or two there was silence in the pass, broken only by the fidgeting of Stark’s horses, which had been picketed somewhere round a bend out of sight from the cave mouth.

“Wonder if they’ll try to rush me,” thought Saxon, and by way of an experiment, he stuck his hat on the end of his cleaning rod and poked it gently round the corner.

Crack! and it flew from the rod-tip. Saxon scooped it in and coolly examined a round hole through the crown. “Just as well my head wasn’t inside it,” he muttered.

His keen ear caught a rustle among the rocks on the far side of the open space in front of the cave. Something snaked from one boulder to another.

Saxon took a rapid snap shot, and a yell and a flurry of dust told him the bullet had reached its mark.

"Teach 'em to keep their distance," growled Saxon, as a fresh volley rattled against his breastwork.

Quiet again. Only a whisper of voices out of sight round the corner.

Saxon listened keenly. "Stark's there. That's his voice, I'll swear. Now look out for trouble."

Firing broke out again. Firing so hot and heavy that Saxon dared not raise his head. Suddenly through a crack between the stones he saw men come running up into the open space before the cave.

He thrust his muzzle through the loophole and blazed away furiously.

Two went down. One was dead, but the other squirmed to shelter. It was fearfully difficult to aim through such a narrow opening. So far as Saxon could see, no fewer than four men were safe behind the boulders barely thirty yards away.

His lips tightened. "Been all my way so far," he muttered; "but now——"

Now it was different. At once the four began to fire, and the range was so close that the nickel-tipped bullets cut splinters from the stones, one of which slashed Saxon badly across the forehead.

Blood poured down his face, half blinding him; but he pumped lead back so vigorously that not one of his ambushed enemies dared show so much as a finger-tip.

The firing slackened again. Saxon mopped the blood from his eyes, and thrust fresh cartridges into his magazine.

With dismay he saw that his supply was running low. What he had left must be kept for a last stand.

Firing broke out again. Saxon did not reply. He remained

quiet so long that the men opposite began to believe that one of their chance shots had taken effect. A head appeared over a boulder.

Saxon smiled grimly. "Not yet," he muttered.

The men began to expose themselves more freely. They meant to rush him. Of that he was sure. And when they made their rush a dozen or so more would come up from below, and what could one man do against a score?

Saxon glanced rapidly back into the cave. He had not been to the end, but it seemed to run a good way back. An idea was stirring in his brain.

"They'll expect to find me just inside this breastwork," he muttered. "If they don't it'll flummox them for a bit and give me a chance. Question is whether there's any shelter back there. I'll have to chance it."

Next instant he was creeping rapidly back into the dusky depths of the tunnel.

"Old workings, as I'm alive—and a cross-cut! Saxon, my boy, you're still in luck!"

The place had plainly been opened by old-time miners. There was a cut in the right-hand side some ten or twelve feet deep. Just outside this lay his unlucky horse. It was stone dead. A bullet through the spine.

Saxon was in the very act of creeping across the poor dead beast, when he was warned by the tramp of running feet coming towards the cave.

"Coming, by thunder!" he exclaimed, and springing to his feet, whirled round.

Here they came. From the mouth of the cave Saxon saw dark forms silhouetted against the light. Exactly as he had foreseen, they paused an instant as they sprang upon his breastwork.

Now came his chance. They could not see him. Standing boldly outside the cross-cut he set to defending his position with the determination not to give in.

So vigorous was his defence that three of the four figures

crumpled up and dropped outside the wall. The fourth, however, sprang inwards and made a vengeful rush at Saxon.

Saxon snapped at him, missed, and next moment reeled backwards into the little driftway. A burning pain in his left shoulder told him he had been badly hit.

Dropping his carbine, which he could use no more, he snatched his pistol from its holster.

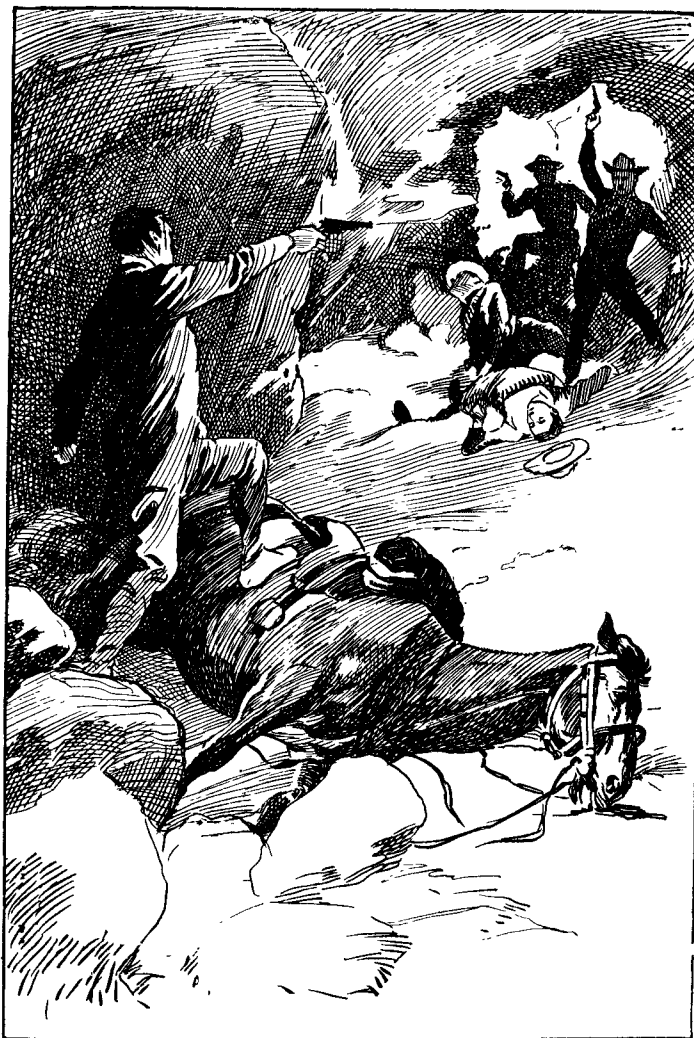
Just in time. A knife was flashing before his eye as his revolver bullet caught the man slap between the eyes, and he fell with a thud to the ground.

As he fell there was a clatter of falling stones, and three more came springing over the breastwork. Stark himself led them.

"This sees my finish," muttered Saxon. "Five more shots, and then——"

Though his head was spinning and his left arm hung useless by his side, the scout gathered himself for a final effort.

Springing from his refuge he rushed upon his enemies, firingly furiously as he came.



The Scout gathered himself for a final effort.

See page 248.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LAST OF STARK

TOM was not half a mile away when the first crash of firing came to his ears.

Instinctively his hand tightened on the bridle. He was on the point of swinging round and galloping back.

He thought of Saxon's orders and, with a groan, drove in his heels and followed after his father.

"Sooner we find them police and bring 'em back the better!" cried the old man, glancing back. "Where do you reckon to meet them?"

"Don't know," replied Tom miserably.

"Don't be down-hearted, my son," said John Holt quietly. "Saxon knows more o' this game than us do. Obey his orders an' we'll come out a-top."

"And meantime those brutes'll murder him!" cried Tom bitterly.

The elder man said no more, and together they rode as hard as they dared down the steep stony pass. At every turn Tom gazed eagerly out.

"Dubois has two days. They ought to be here!" he muttered desperately.

"So he is, Tom. There they be, if I'm not much mistook!" John Holt pointed to a single figure, a mere dot which had just emerged from the forest more than a mile away.

Tom pulled up with a jerk. He stared a moment with eyes nearly starting from his head.

"Hurrah!" he roared, as the scarlet uniforms of Mounted Police flared against the green. Then he wheeled.

"Fetch 'em as quick as you can, dad. I'm back to Saxon."

He was off before his father could utter a single word of remonstrance. John Holt watched his son for a second or two as he furiously spurred his flagging beast back up the stony track.

"A fine lad! I'm real proud of him!" he muttered. Then he, too, stuck his heels into his horse and went away down the hill at breakneck speed.

As Tom tore back uphill two heavy bursts of firing crashed out.

"Alive still, anyway!" gasped the boy. And then as he neared the western mouth of the pass it suddenly struck him that he had no gun.

"What an idiot I am! What on earth can I do?" he muttered.

Firing was still going on. So Saxon was not done yet. Tom checked his horse. What should he do? Make a dash into the pass?

Pure foolishness. Chuck his own life away and do no good.

He glanced round, and all of a sudden a brilliant inspiration came to him.

Here, at the western mouth of the pass, the cliffs were not so precipitous as on the east. They rose in terraces, and Tom saw that he could climb them.

Climb and get beyond the cave and above Stark's men. Tom chuckled fiercely as he flung himself from his horse. "Make 'em hop a bit when the rocks come smacking down out of the sky."

Next moment he was breasting the slope.

It was steeper than he had thought, and loose rocks fallen from above lay in every crevice. He had to be very careful not to loosen them and so alarm the men in the pass.

The firing ceased, and, terrified at the ill-omened silence, Tom climbed the faster.

At last, panting and dripping with perspiration, his hands raw and his clothes in ribbons, he was on the summit, nearly

a hundred feet above the pass. The mountain-top, like the pass below, was covered with loose boulders ; otherwise entirely bare.

Tom crawled to the edge and looked down.

Everything in the gorge below was clear to him.

Away to the right were the horses, picketed in a bunch. Between them and the cave mouth quite a dozen men were standing close under the near cliff.

In the strong light he could see every detail, their brown hands gripping their rifles, their fierce faces turned eagerly towards the cave mouth. He saw the dead bodies strewn here and there along the floor of the pass, and felt a fierce glow of exultation as he realised the magnificent fight which his friend had put up single-handed against such tremendous odds.

He saw, too—and this was what frightened him—the four men crouching among the boulders opposite the mouth of the cave. He realised that Saxon was now in deadly peril, and he gripped a large rock convulsively.

Tom leaped to his feet with a groan of dismay as the storm of firing broke out again and the four made their mad rush upon the cave, and at the same moment he saw the rest of the crowd down the pass come bolting up after the first four. Stark's tall form was at their head.

Furious with himself, and desperate at Saxon's peril, Tom snatched up a great chunk of rock and, lifting it high above his head, hurled it down upon the attackers.

It whizzed through the air, and fell exactly in the centre of the crowd. Tom saw them all spring in every direction just as if a shell had burst among them. He heard yells of horror and dismay, and saw one man flattened on the rocky floor of the pass.

Bullets came screaming past him, but Tom, mad with excitement, paid not the slightest attention. With all his strength he was levering a boulder weighing a couple of hundredweight over the edge.

Rattle, crash, over it went and fell with an appalling smash right in the centre of the pass in front of the cave mouth. The fall shivered it to atoms and splinters flew in every direction. Howls of pain and terror rose, and the rest of the men, all but the three who had already gained the mouth of the cave, scurried away in panic down the eastern hill.

Entirely forgetting himself, Tom rushed along the edge of the cliff hurling down stones one after another till the survivors of Stark's band, terror-stricken at this deadly bombardment, scuttled like rats to any shelter they could find, and lay there not daring to move.

Tom glanced westwards. Hurrah ! the scarlet coats of the police were in sight. They were galloping hard up the hill.

The robbers heard them, too, and one by one began to bolt out of cover and rush for their horses.

"Escape—not you !" roared Tom, and dashing along the edge to a point just above the ponies he put his shoulder to a great rounded mass of rock which lay poised on the very edge.

The bandits saw him, and yells of rage and despair were followed by a sharp crackle of rifle-shots. One bullet grazed Tom's shoulder, but he never even felt it.

The stone rocked. Another mighty effort. It over-balanced, hung a second, and ponderously rolled into the abyss.

There was a crash that woke the echoes for miles. Then with screams and snorts of terror every single pony broke madly away.

Next instant, with a loud hurrah, the police galloped through the western gate of the pass, and charged down upon the disorganised outlaws.

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Tom scrambled down the cliff.

He and his father together rushed into the cave. Dead men littered the floor. The place was a shambles. Stumbling

over corpses they found the dead horse, and just beside it two men lying quiet, locked in a death grip.

One was Stark, the other Saxon. Stark was on top. Tom tore him away.

He flung himself on his knees beside Saxon.

The scout lay very still, his grey eyes closed, blood on his face, his useless left arm twisted unnaturally beneath him.

"Dead!" cried Tom in a lamentable voice.

But his father pushed him aside, and tearing open Saxon's blood-stained shirt, laid his ear against the heart.

A moment. Then he raised his head. "No; still alive. Carry him out, Tom."

As they laid the scout in the sunlight by the mouth of the cave, Dubois came tearing back, a smoking pistol in his hand.

"Zey ees caught or killed. All of ze whole lot of zem!" he shouted.

When he saw Saxon, his triumph evaporated.

"He isn't dead," said John Holt sturdily.

The French-Canadian dropped down beside Saxon, and out came his ever-ready flask. Tom meanwhile rushed for water.

When he came back, imagine his delight to see Saxon's eyes open. Dubois was busy, skilfully bandaging his wounds.

Tom gave an exclamation of relief and joy. Saxon turned his head and smiled.

"Tom, you're a credit to my teaching," he said in a weak voice. "Your artillery saved the situation."

"Me! It was you!" retorted Tom indignantly.

"We won't quarrel," replied Saxon, with a faint twinkle in his eye. "Anyhow, Stark's gone, and his band's broken up, and as soon as I'm mended up I'm coming to help you dig the gold at Sunk River."

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For once in a way a gold find did not prove disappointing. The next six months showed that there had been good reason for Stark's ambition to own Sunk River.

The place was only a small patch, but it yielded over twenty thousand pounds' worth of dust, quite enough to make simple men like John Holt and his son rich beyond their dreams, and to more than satisfy Saxon, upon whom they forced a third share.

They never took a penny out of the country. All was invested at Sunk River. This wonderful valley, with its tall walls of cliff, its lovely river and rich pasture, is now the show farm in ten thousand square miles, and the two Holts would not change places with any squire in the old country.

Saxon lives with them in their big, comfortable farmhouse, and little Dubois and the troopers Ryder and Kelly are frequent visitors whenever Colonel Westcott gives them leave.

Another man comes, too. A tall, lean mountaineer. He is a special chum of Tom Holt, and it was entirely through Tom's good offices that this one member of Stark's gang escaped the fate which befell the rest of the robbers taken alive. He is the man who, alone of all Stark's band, dared take the part of the prisoners against his late chief.

THE END

